

COVID Intensive Learning Support Program

Phase 3 evaluation

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation



Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

The Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation (CESE) undertakes in-depth analysis of education programs and outcomes across early childhood, school, training, and higher education to inform whole-of-government, evidence-based decision-making. Put simply, it seeks to find out what works best. Its focus is all education in NSW. CESE's main responsibilities within the department are:

- qualitative and quantitative research, including data analysis, evidence papers and case studies that build understanding and uptake of evidence-based practice
- robust data collection to enable research and statistics for the education and training sector
- evaluating key policies and programs to strengthen quality delivery and student outcomes
- national engagement on education research agenda and data strategy
- driving capability uplift in the use of data and evidence as part of everyday practice
- trialling innovative initiatives to improve student outcomes.

Authors

Cecile Casanova, Huy Pham, Sam Gardiner and Amy Robson
Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, December 2023, Sydney, NSW

Please cite this publication as:

CESE (Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation) (2023) *COVID Intensive Learning Support Program – Phase 3 evaluation*, NSW Department of Education.

For more information about this report, please contact:

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
Department of Education
GPO Box 33
Sydney NSW 2001

info@cese.nsw.gov.au

education.nsw.gov.au/cese

We acknowledge the homelands of all Aboriginal people and pay our respect to Country.

Acknowledgments

The NSW Department of Education and ARTD Consultants jointly authored this report.

We thank the many school staff, students and parents and carers who participated in this evaluation. We thank all the schools we visited for their warm welcome, and all the people who took part in surveys, interviews and focus groups for their time and insights.

We acknowledge the assistance of Annalies van Westenbrugge, Christine Reilly, Jayne Schmarr, Janine Szostak and colleagues in the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program team. We are grateful to the entire COVID ILSP school support team for their work in contacting schools to improve data quality. We also thank Rebecca Havey in the information governance team for reviewing and providing feedback on participant information and consent materials.

Robert Wells, Dan Murphy and Robin van den Honert in the CESE evaluation and effectiveness team provided valuable methodological review and quality assurance.

NSW Department of Education COVID ILSP evaluation team

Cecile Casanova, Huy Pham, Samuel Gardiner, Amy Robson, Emily Spencer, Aditya Koneru

ARTD consultancy team

Rebecca Wilkinson, Rae Fry, Natalie Martino, Keely Mitchell, Mitchell Rice-Brading, Fergus Bailey, Lia Oliver

ARTD associates

Jane Ford, Allcoms Consulting and James Finn, Spillover Data Consultancy

Table of contents

Glossary	9
Foreword	10
Executive summary	11
The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program	15
Program description and aims	15
The evaluation	16
Overview of evaluation methods	18
Summary of evaluation methods	19
Limitations	22
Evaluation question 1: How has the program been implemented?	24
Staffing	24
Delivery of tuition sessions	27
Selection of students	34
Use of assessments to monitor progress	38
Changes to program implementation	41
Online implementation model	42
Enablers of successful implementation	44
Evaluation question 2: What was the perceived impact of the program on student learning and engagement?	46
Perceived impact on learning progress	46
Key factors in achieving learning progress	49
Perceived impact on students' confidence and engagement	51
Key perceived benefits of small group tuition	53
Perceived impact on particular cohorts and contexts	54
Strengths and successes	58

Evaluation question 3: What challenges were encountered by schools, staff and students?	60
Staffing	62
Time to consolidate implementation	62
Student factors	63
Evaluation question 4: What teaching and learning resources were incorporated into practice and how helpful were they?	65
Use of training and support resources	65
Helpfulness of resources	68
Perceived impact of the program on schools' practices and staff capabilities and learning and support approaches	72
Evaluation question 5: Did the program improve the academic outcomes of participating students?	77
Program effect on academic growth	77
Limitations in estimating program effect	81
Evaluation question 6: What was the impact of the program on student engagement?	86
Number of absences from school	86
Limitations in estimating program effect on engagement	87
Evaluation question 7: What are the economic costs and benefits of the change in students' academic outcomes attributable to the program?	89
Cost-benefit analysis framework	89
Cost-benefit outcome	89
References	91

List of tables

Table 1 Process evaluation methods	19
Table 2 Outcome evaluation methods	21
Table 3 Composition of the program-funded school workforce in 2022	24
Table 4 Key staff responsibilities and features for successful implementation by role	26
Table 5 Tuition session delivery characteristics in 2022	28
Table 6 Length of tutoring sessions in 2022	29
Table 7 Tuition frequency and tuition cycle length in 2022	30
Table 8 Demographics of participants compared to the government school cohort	35
Table 9 Impact of 'data cleaning' calls to schools on data quality	82

List of figures

Figure 1 Staff employed to deliver and administer the program, by type of school	25
Figure 2 Proportion of tuition groups focused on literacy or numeracy, by year level	31
Figure 3 Comparison of baseline numeracy and reading Check-in assessment scores between participants and their year level cohort	37
Figure 4 Types of assessments used to monitor student progress*	39
Figure 5 Types of changes to implementation since the program began	41
Figure 6 Reasons for changes to program implementation	42
Figure 7 Perceived impact of the program on students' learning progress, by role	47
Figure 8 Educators' perception of impact by time delivering small group tuition	47
Figure 9 Staff views of the most important factors for increasing students' learning progress in small group tuition	50
Figure 10 Educator and classroom teacher perceptions of the impact of the program on students	51
Figure 11 Perceived impact of the program on students' learning progress, by primary and secondary school educators and classroom teachers	54
Figure 12 Perceived impact of the program on students, by primary and secondary school educators and classroom teachers	55
Figure 13 Student views of the impact of the program, by year level	57
Figure 14 Students' feelings about the tutoring sessions	59
Figure 15 Most significant challenges in delivering the program in 2022, by role	61
Figure 16 Reported program activity over the 2022 school year	63
Figure 17 Educators' self-assessment of whether they had sufficient training to deliver small group tuition, by type of qualification	66
Figure 18 Use of COVID ILSP teaching and learning resources, by role	67

Figure 19 Helpfulness of COVID ILSP resources, by role	68
Figure 20 Perceived effects of the program on staff skills and capabilities, by role	72
Figure 21 Perceived impact of the program on leadership capability, by role	73
Figure 22 Perceived impact of the program on collaboration among staff, by role	74
Figure 23 Types of changes to other types of learning support reported by principals	75
Figure 24 Growth in Check-in reading scores among literacy tuition participants and matched non-participants	78
Figure 25 Growth in Check-in numeracy scores among numeracy tuition participants and matched non-participants	79
Figure 26 Program effect on growth in Check-in scores, by year level and area of tuition focus	80
Figure 27 Program effect on absences, by year level	87

Glossary

Term	Meaning
CESE	Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation
Check-in assessment	Annual statewide assessments for all year groups
COVID ILSP	COVID Intensive Learning Support Program
EAL/D	English as an additional language or dialect
LBOTE	Language background other than English
NAPLAN	National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy
PLAN2	Planning Literacy and Numeracy: internal software platform for recording student participation in the program, as well as teacher observations against the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions and other assessments
SLSO	School learning support officer

Foreword

The COVID Intensive Learning Support program (COVID ILSP) began from a solid research and evidence base supporting small-group tuition as the preferred intervention for students falling behind in their learning. The department's rapid response to students' disrupted learning has been well-received by schools, principals, educators and students. Since its announcement in late 2020, the COVID Intensive Learning Support program has supported more than 290,000 students in targeted literacy and numeracy small-group tuition led by over 16,000 educators including 4,100 school learning support officers (SLSOs).

One of the successes of the program is that it has been responsive to the changing and often challenging learning landscape for students in New South Wales. Not only did the program operate during COVID lockdowns in 2021, it also addressed the ongoing disruption faced by schools during a series of natural disasters including floods and bushfires. The program has maintained its flexibility, allowing schools to make decisions about their implementation model and student participation, in response to their unique needs. With each year, the program has responded with new features and resources to facilitate the implementation of small-group tuition, including an online provision and support channels.

The evaluation has taken a 3-phased approach to evolve alongside the program. New data sources were identified and pursued through each of the 3 phases to provide additional insights into the program's implementation and impact. As a result of rapidly changing circumstances, the evaluation has utilised data that was already available through existing channels, rightfully prioritising the needs of teachers over those of the researchers; however, limiting the conclusions that could be drawn about impact on student achievement.

Each evaluation phase has been developed to respond to the factors that impacted the previous data collection. Additional instructions were provided to schools and educators to improve the consistency of data collected through PLAN2 about students' participation in the program. Similarly, a focus on the implementation of the program was included in the Phase 3 evaluation, with a comprehensive interview and school visit schedule. These measures have improved the quality of data collected for the evaluation of this program and have been directly fed back into the program team.

The positive response to the small-group tuition from schools, principals, educators and students has shown that this model of support is valued across the system as one of many opportunities for advancing equitable outcomes, opportunities and experiences for all learners in New South Wales.

Executive summary

This Phase 3 evaluation focused on the 2022 implementation and impact of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program, building on findings from the Phase 1 and Phase 2 evaluations. It sought to understand how the program had been implemented in NSW government schools, the impact of the program on student achievement as well as student motivation and engagement, and the challenges associated with implementing the program.

Both staff and students perceive that the program has had a positive impact on students' learning and engagement.

In 2022, the most significant challenge encountered by schools remained the difficulty recruiting staff to deliver the program. The main challenges identified by students and educators related to the withdrawal of students from regular classroom teaching as the main mode of delivery of the program.

At a system level, participating students and similar non-participating students improved their standardised test scores by the same amount between 2021 and 2022. This improvement in academic outcomes cannot be attributed to the effects of the program as implemented, as students experienced the same degree of academic growth regardless of whether they participated in the program.

Based on an analysis of changes in students' attendance as a proxy of student engagement, the program as implemented had no effect on attendance in 2022.

No monetisable long-term economic benefits to students could be attributed to the program. However, the program may have unmonetisable long-term economic benefits resulting from improvements to students' motivation, confidence and attitude to school.

In March 2021, the NSW Government announced the funding of the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program (COVID ILSP). The program was extended for another year in 2022, and again in 2023.

The program supported schools to employ educators to deliver small group tuition to students with the greatest learning needs, especially in literacy and numeracy.

Phase 3 evaluation focused on the implementation and impact of the program in 2022. It sought to understand how the program had been implemented in NSW government schools, the challenges associated with implementing the program and the impact of the program on student achievement as well as student motivation and engagement.

Evaluation question 1: How has the program been implemented?

Due to the flexibility of the program, implementation in 2022 varied by school. Tuition sessions were mostly delivered consistent with the broad guidelines set by the department and the Grattan Institute's recommendations for effective small group tuition: small groups of 2 to 5 students, sessions of 20 to 50 minutes, and at least 3 sessions a week over 10 to 20 weeks. Most schools delivered small group tuition by taking students out of regular classroom teaching, called the 'withdrawal' mode of delivery.

A total of 138,268 students, 17% of all NSW government school students, were reported as having participated in the program in 2022. Students selected for the program were generally those who had fallen behind during learning from home. They differed from the general NSW government school population, with greater proportions of students with lower-than-average Check-in assessment scores, Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students, students from socio-educationally disadvantaged backgrounds, and students with disability.

Of the educators employed to deliver small group tuition to students two-thirds (66%) were qualified teachers and about a quarter (25%) were school learning support officers (SLSOs). Employing SLSOs and pre-service teachers as COVID ILSP educators helped ease recruitment challenges and provided an excellent development opportunity to those staff.

Evaluation question 2: What was the perceived impact of the program?

Staff and students generally perceived a positive impact of the program on students' learning and engagement.

The vast majority of staff surveyed in 2022 (97% of coordinators, 97% of educators, 95% of principals and 81% of classroom teachers) perceived that the program improved students' learning progress and improved students' confidence, engagement and motivation.

Most students surveyed (85% of primary students and 75% of secondary students) felt they were doing a little or a lot better at school after participating in the program. In focus groups, students said they liked that the educator had the time and capacity in the smaller group setting to explain concepts in different ways and at a slower pace, and felt the educators could provide more personal attention than a teacher could in a larger class.

In interviews and focus groups, staff suggested that more time may be needed for the benefits of the small group tuition to translate to improved academic outcomes. It took schools time to establish a well-functioning implementation model on a scale sufficient to address learning gaps that were caused, or exacerbated, by COVID-19.

Evaluation question 3: What challenges were encountered by schools, staff and students?

The most significant challenge in 2022 was schools' difficulty recruiting staff to deliver the program, and redeploying teachers who had originally been employed as program educators to cover absences among classroom teachers. Employing non-accredited teachers, such as SLSOs, to deliver the program helped ease staffing constraints.

Schools also faced significant logistical challenges in implementing an extensive program in rapidly changing circumstances. Although schooling from home did not occur during 2022, staff shortages early in the year and frequent redeployment of educators meant that implementation did not stabilise until Terms 3 and 4 of 2022.

For educators and students, the main challenge in 2022 seemed to be difficulties arising from withdrawing students from their regular classroom teaching for delivery of small group tuition. Careful timetabling and proactive engagement between educators and classroom teachers mitigated this challenge, as did effective communication by school leaders about the purpose and importance of the program.

Evaluation question 4: What teaching and learning resources were incorporated into practice and how helpful were they?

In 2022, the 3 resources most used by school staff were the COVID ILSP professional learning (PL) modules, website and Microsoft Teams space, with some differences between principals, coordinators and educators.

A greater proportion of principals and educators rated the resources as helpful than the coordinators. More than half of principals and educators considered the resources helpful for all their designed purposes. Coordinators' more complex information needs may explain their slightly lower ratings.

Staff felt that the program improved staff skills and capabilities. Educators indicated that their leadership skills had improved, while principals felt that the program had a positive impact on leadership capability in their school.

Evaluation question 5: Did the program improve the academic outcomes of participating students?

We used the department's Check-in assessment to measure academic growth from 2021 to 2022 in students from Years 4 to 9. On average, students in every year level improved their academic outcomes from 2021 to 2022.

For reading, in every year level that completed the Check-in assessment, students who participated in the program achieved equivalent academic growth over one year compared to similar non-participating students.

For numeracy, in most year levels that completed the Check-in assessment, there was equivalent growth between students who participated in the program and similar non-participating students but there were 2 year levels, Years 5 and 6, that showed slightly less growth.

On average, student growth was the same between students who participated in the program and similar non-participants, so we cannot confidently attribute students' growth in learning to the effect of the program alone. This result is further complicated by the flexible nature of the program and the sensitivity of the Check-in assessment used to specifically measure student progress.

Issues with data quality also limited our ability to evaluate the effect of variations in program implementation on academic outcomes. Although the program's data collection tools were better in 2022 compared to 2021, inconsistent records of student participation in the program prevented us from analysing the effects of some implementation choices of key interest, including tuition intensity and duration.

Evaluation question 6: What was the impact of the program on student engagement?

We used attendance as a proxy of student engagement. Participating in the program had no measurable effect on the rate of absences in Term 4 2022 compared to non-participating students.

Evaluation question 7: What are the economic costs and benefits of the change in students' academic outcomes attributable to the program?

As we could not attribute participants' academic growth to their participation in the program, we have not proceeded with a cost-benefit analysis. However, given the overwhelming perception by school staff that the program has had a positive effect on student confidence, motivation and attitude toward schools, there may be unmonetised long-term benefits.

Schools spent \$250 million implementing the program in 2022. Schools were only permitted to spend these funds on wages, which may have resulted in an economic stimulus that we have not investigated in this evaluation report.

The COVID Intensive Learning Support Program

During COVID-19 restrictions in 2020 and 2021, many students in NSW schools experienced extended periods of learning from home. The NSW Government introduced the COVID Intensive Learning Support Program (COVID ILSP) to support students to catch up on learning they missed during these periods.

Program description and aims

The COVID ILSP provides funding to schools to employ additional educators to deliver small group tuition for students who need it most. The program has been adopted across NSW primary, secondary and specialist schools. The 2021 program started during Term 1 2021. In November 2021, the NSW Government announced that it would continue to fund the program for another year. In October 2022, the government extended the program to June 2023, and in January 2023, the government announced additional funding to extend the program until the end of 2023.

In 2022, a total of \$279 million was distributed to 2,186 government schools to implement the program. Funding was provided to all public infants, primary, secondary and central schools, schools for specific purposes, including schools for students with high support needs, hospital schools, and schools in juvenile justice centres. Program funds were used to deliver small group tuition to 138,268 students.

The COVID ILSP involves supplementary teaching and learning support for groups of 2 to 5 students. A report by the Grattan Institute in June 2020 advocated for small group tuition based on evidence of impacts on student learning. This report helped inform the program design (Sonnemann and Goss 2020).

Program educators (tutors) may be casual or temporary teachers, retired teachers, student teachers (also called pre-service teachers), student learning support officers (SLSOs) or other paraprofessionals. Tuition focuses on literacy and/or numeracy and is targeted to students' learning needs. The Department of Education recommended that small group tuition for the COVID ILSP 'should:

- involve groups of 2 to 5 students
- involve sessions that are 20 to 50 minutes in duration
- occur at least 3 times per week over 10 to 20 weeks dependent on the impact on learning' (NSW Department of Education 2022).

The COVID ILSP aims to:

- increase the achievement of students who were disadvantaged by the move to remote and/or flexible learning, helping to close the equity gap
- gather knowledge about the small group tuition approaches that are most commonly used and their perceived impact in different cohorts and contexts
- provide schools, teachers and additional educators with teaching and learning resources, assessment tools, and professional learning.

The evaluation

Purpose

The Phase 3 evaluation aimed to measure the extent to which the COVID ILSP succeeded in its stated goal of ‘increasing the achievement of students’ and built on the department’s Phase 1 and Phase 2 COVID ILSP evaluations. The Phase 3 evaluation considered changes in psychological engagement with learning, and in formal assessment outcomes in literacy and numeracy across all year levels. The evaluation also aimed to describe the experience of a wide variety of participants in the program, and sought to identify successful strategies implemented by schools, any challenges faced, and any lasting impacts of the COVID ILSP on wider school practices.

Evaluation structure

The department engaged ARTD Consultants, an external evaluation consultancy group, to support the Phase 3 **process evaluation** of the COVID ILSP. ARTD focused on understanding the experiences of students, teachers, principals, COVID ILSP coordinators and educators in implementing the program, to help understand the impact of the program on schools and students.

The department’s COVID ILSP evaluation team, based in the Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation, undertook the Phase 3 **outcome evaluation**. The purpose was to determine the impact of the program on student academic outcomes and student engagement, and to assess the overall cost–benefit of the program.

Any further references to process and/or outcome evaluations in this report refer to these Phase 3 evaluations, unless specified otherwise.

Scope and focus areas

The scope of the process evaluation’s data collection and analysis included:

- students’ perceptions of the impact of the program
- feedback from school staff about changes to practice or capabilities as a result of the program
- changes to schools’ learning and support approaches as a result of the program
- schools’ implementation and use of assessments (either internal and/or third party) to measure student improvement
- development of leadership skills across a school as a result of the program.

The scope of the outcome evaluation’s data collection and analysis included:

- quantitative descriptions of the scope and scale of the program, its participants, workforce and delivery models
- modelling the effect of the program on:
 - student academic outcomes in literacy and numeracy
 - student engagement with learning.

Key evaluation questions

The evaluation had 7 questions:

1. How has the program been implemented?
2. What was the perceived impact of the program on students' learning and engagement?
3. What challenges were encountered by schools, staff and students?
4. What teaching and learning resources were incorporated into practice and how helpful were they?
5. Did the program improve the academic outcomes of participating students?
6. What was the impact of the program on student engagement?
7. What are the economic costs and benefits of the change in students' academic outcomes attributable to the program?

Overview of evaluation methods

The process evaluation used a mixed methods approach for students, educators, coordinators, principals and classroom teachers. The methods included:

- surveys with staff and students (n=2,811 staff and n=5,027 students)
- interviews and focus groups with staff and students in 10 schools
- online interviews and focus groups with staff in 10 additional schools
- phone interviews with a small number of parents and carers (n=9).

The outcome evaluation was based on a sample of students. It compared outcomes for participating students and similar non-participating students based on:

- academic outcomes using 2021 and 2022 Check-in assessment data
- student engagement, using the department's student attendance dataset.

Tables 1 and 2 summarise the evaluation methods. Appendix 1 of the Technical report provides additional detail on the methods and limitations, and also describes the ethical review process.

Summary of evaluation methods

Table 1

Process evaluation methods

Method and timing	Analysis	Participants and focus
Staff surveys Term 4 2022 Weeks 2 to 4	Descriptive quantitative analysis of closed-response items and thematic qualitative analysis of open-text items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 2,811 eligible responses (response rate 16.5%): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 738 ILSP coordinators (who may also have been principals, educators or classroom teachers) 613 principals 975 ILSP educators 485 classroom teachers.¹ 1,513 schools were represented: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1,813 responses from primary schools 818 responses from secondary schools 73 responses from schools for specific purposes 63 responses from central/community schools 44 responses from Connected Communities schools. The department developed the sampling and weighting approach for data to better reflect the population characteristics. Questions focused on implementation, barriers and enablers, perceived impacts for staff capabilities and school practices, use of assessments to monitor student progress, and staff perceptions of impacts for students. Some questions were adapted from the survey conducted for the Phase 2 evaluation.
Student surveys Term 4 2022 Weeks 4 to 7	Descriptive quantitative analysis of closed-response items	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 5,027 eligible responses: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 3,460 primary students 1,567 secondary students. Respondents included students from 227 primary schools and 77 secondary schools. The survey was conducted online. Educators invited students to complete the survey, and educators could assist younger students if they asked for help. Three questions focused on how students felt about tuition sessions and their perceptions of impacts. Response items included words and pictures. Wording was slightly different for primary and secondary students.

¹ **Note:** the classroom teachers eligible to respond to the survey were those who had students in any of their classes who were receiving, or had previously received, small group tuition through the COVID ILSP.

Method and timing	Analysis	Participants and focus
School visits Term 4 2022 Weeks 2 to 5	Thematic qualitative analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interviews and focus groups were conducted with staff and students at 10 schools. • Nine visits were conducted face-to-face and one visit was conducted online due to school capacity constraints. • Schools were purposively sampled to maximise diversity and selected in collaboration with the department. • Questions were wide-ranging, covering: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ delivery models ◦ student and staff experience of the program ◦ contextual factors that affected implementation and impact ◦ strategies used to overcome challenges ◦ broader changes to learning and support approaches ◦ use of assessments ◦ leadership, collaboration and communication within the school ◦ perceived benefits of small group tuition. • Group or individual interviews were conducted with school leaders and coordinators. • Focus groups were conducted with educators and classroom teachers, and separately with participating students. • Student focus groups used participatory engagement techniques
Parent/carer telephone interviews Term 4 2022 Weeks 8 to 10	Thematic qualitative analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Nine parents/carers were interviewed by phone, recruited from 4 of the schools that were visited. • Questions focused on parents'/carers' perception of students' experience and any noticeable impacts for students.
Online interviews/ focus groups Term 4 2022 Weeks 5 to 8	Thematic qualitative analysis	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Online interviews and focus groups with school staff at an additional 10 schools. • Schools were purposively sampled to maximise diversity. • Interviews and focus groups lasted 45 to 90 minutes.

Table 2

Outcome evaluation methods

Method and timing	Analysis	Participants and focus
Academic outcomes analysis 2021–2022	Comparison of 2022 Check-in assessment performance in participating and similar non-participating students. Propensity score matching following by generalised estimating equation (GEE) modelling of difference-in-difference of Check-in scores.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A representative random sample of 282 schools was drawn from the 2,186 schools that participated in the program in 2022. • Student-level COVID ILSP participation data was extracted from PLAN2. • Data entry staff at the sampled schools were contacted by the COVID ILSP team to verify their recorded student participation information. • The 7,766 (5,061 literacy, 4,160 numeracy) participating students at the sampled schools were matched to an equal number of similar students who did not participate in the program. Students were matched on a range of demographic, academic and school characteristics, including socio-educational advantage, remoteness, and 2021 Check-in assessment results for reading and numeracy. • For each of the 6 year levels that completed the Check-in assessment in 2021 and 2022, results were compared between participating and matched non-participating students, after modelling to account for differences in their student-level and school-level characteristics. • Students who received literacy tuition during their program participation were assessed against the Check-in assessment's reading domain. Students who received numeracy tuition were assessed against the numeracy domain.
Long-term cost-benefit analysis 2021–2022	Scaling of changes in academic outcomes to projected lifetime earnings.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Differences in Check-in assessment scores between the participating and matched non-participating students were standardised and a multiplier applied to estimate changes to projected lifetime earnings.
Impact of the program on student engagement 2021–2022	Comparison of changes in school attendance between participating and similar non-participating students in Term 1 and Term 4 2022. Propensity score matching following by generalised estimating equation modelling of difference-in-difference of days absent.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Matched cohorts of 8,754 participating and 8,754 non-participating students were used to analyse attendance at school. • The change in number of days absent from school was compared between participating and non-participating students, after modelling to account for student-level and school-level characteristics.

Limitations

The process evaluation had some limitations:

- The student survey respondents were not strictly representative of students participating in the program. Educators had discretion in inviting students to complete the survey.
- Small numbers of students in Years 11 and 12 responded to the survey (32 from each year), reducing the reliability of results for those years.
- Younger students' responses may have been influenced by assistance from educators.
- We reweighted staff survey responses to better reflect the characteristics of the statewide staff population, but it is possible that some responder bias remains.
- There were relatively small numbers of survey respondents from schools for specific purposes, central/community schools and Connected Communities schools, reducing reliability about views from those types of schools.
- We interviewed only 9 parents and carers to provide an indication of parents' experiences.

The outcome evaluation had some design limitations:

- It was a non-experimental evaluation design. Schools had great flexibility in implementing the program and in selecting students to participate, and in many cases adjusted their implementation and student selection during the school year. Determining the effect of the program under these conditions is not as straightforward as comparing participants to non-participants. The causal relationship between participation and outcomes was statistically modelled in an attempt to emulate an experimental design.
- Data quality concerns during the Phase 2 evaluation prompted us to use a sample of schools whose COVID ILSP participation data could be manually verified by program staff, rather than use the entire NSW student population. The analysis of a smaller number of participants reduced statistical power to detect small program effects, and prevented analysis of subgroups of students. Some data quality issues persist.
- Student attendance at tuition sessions was not systematically recorded by schools, and therefore could not be reported or included in the analysis of program outcomes.
- Educators cannot be linked to student participants with the current COVID ILSP reporting tools. The effects of educator characteristics, such as their occupation, experience or amount of COVID ILSP training, on student outcomes could not be analysed.

- Incomplete reporting of participating students by schools may have introduced bias in estimating the program effect. We used a multiple imputation procedure to attempt to examine the effects of incomplete reporting of tuition characteristics (refer to the Technical report). If complete absence of data for a participant is systematically associated with unmeasured student or tuition characteristics (for example, attendance at tuition sessions or type of educator), this may have biased our estimates of the program's effect.
- Many students are likely to have participated in the program in both 2021 and 2022. In 2021, student participation data was unreliable, with around 30% of schools having contributed no usable student data at all. We therefore did not include 2021 participation data in the Phase 3 analysis, and could not examine the effects of repeated participation in the program over 2 years.

Evaluation question 1: How has the program been implemented?

The implementation of the program varied by school, in staffing, tuition delivery, student selection and assessment, reflecting the flexibility of the program.

Staffing

Schools used a variety of staffing options to deliver the program

Of the 2,187 schools funded to implement the program in 2022, 1,803 schools (82%) used a payroll system which allowed staffing costs to be tracked to a specific program. A total of 6,884 individuals were identifiable as having been employed at schools to implement the program in 2022. Table 3 and Figure 1 describe the COVID ILSP workforce at those schools. Two-thirds of the program workforce were teachers.

Table 3

Composition of the program-funded school workforce in 2022

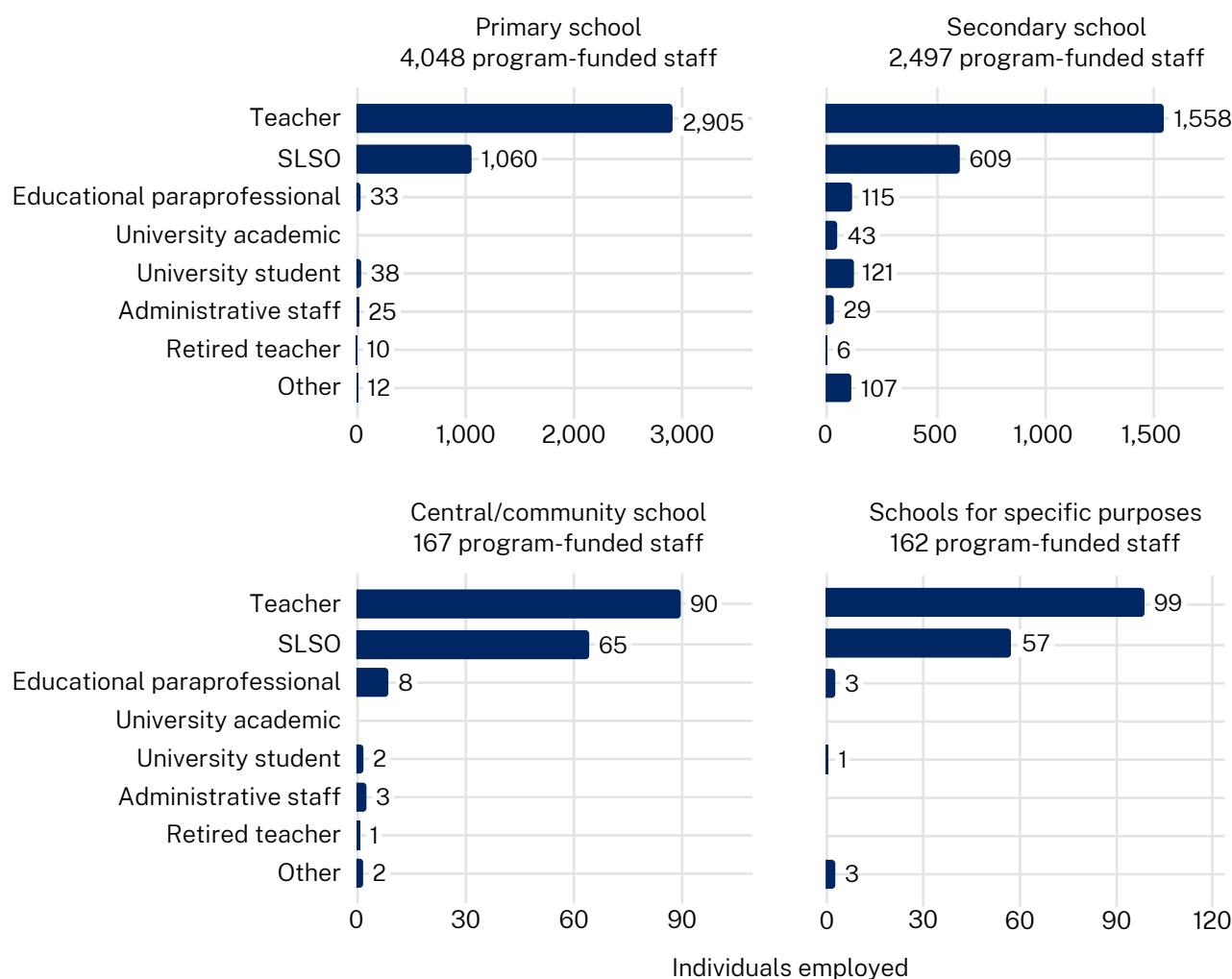
Employment category	Individuals employed	Percentage of COVID ILSP workforce
Teacher	4,662	66.4%
SLSO	1,794	25.6%
University student	161	2.3%
Educational paraprofessional	159	2.3%
Administrative staff	58	0.8%
University academic	43	0.6%
Retired teacher	17	0.2%
Other	124	1.8%
Total distinct individuals	6,884	100%

Source: SAP Payroll. Data reported only for the 1,803 schools that used the WBS-IO Solution software to administer their staffing costs. Individuals may contribute to the count in more than one table row if they were employed in multiple staff categories over the course of 2022 (for example, as a university student at one school and as an SLSO at another school).

Staffing varied by school type (Figure 1). Secondary schools employed the widest range of staff types in their program delivery. Accredited teachers were the most commonly employed small group educators at every type of school. University academics were only employed at secondary schools, as were the majority of university students.

Figure 1

Staff employed to deliver and administer the program, by type of school



Source: SAP Payroll. Data reported only for schools that used the WBS-IO Solution software to administer their staffing costs. Individuals may contribute to the count in more than one location if they were employed in multiple staff categories or multiple school types over the course of 2022.

A small number of schools, 3%, used alternative implementation models that did not require direct recruitment:

- 26 schools used the department’s online tuition program (discussed in section ‘Online implementation model’, [page 42](#))
- 27 schools contracted allied health service providers, who used occupational therapists or speech pathologists to deliver the program
- 16 schools contracted external tuition providers such as Kip McGrath, Cluey Learning or the Australian Tutoring Association to deliver the program.

School leaders, program coordinators, educators, and classroom teachers were all integral to successful implementation

Interviews and focus groups showed that each staff position had a unique role in delivering the program. School leaders, ILSP coordinators and educators, and classroom teachers each had distinct responsibilities and key actions for successful implementation at their schools (Table 4).

Table 4

Key staff responsibilities and features for successful implementation by role

Role	Key responsibilities	Important features for success
School leaders/executive	Communicate purpose and importance of program to drive delivery	Communication of a clear purpose and goal, and taking on board teacher feedback at all levels, helped build teacher support
ILSP coordinators	Plan and lead program implementation, facilitate data collection and input, timetabling, and facilitate communication between teachers and educators	The coordinator role is detailed in the 'Enablers of successful implementation' section (page 44)
ILSP educators	Conduct day-to-day tutoring groups, collect data, communicate with teachers	Building rapport and motivation with students, adapting sessions to student needs Two-way communication and flexibility with classroom teachers on taking students out of class
Classroom teachers	May assist with selection of students into the program, monitor translation of any improvements from tutoring to the classroom, identify learning areas for participating students	Willingness to work with educator (in-class delivery) or have students withdrawn from class (withdrawal model) Two-way communication with educators on timetabling for students being withdrawn from class

Schools were positive about engaging SLSOs and pre-service teachers as educators

In interviews, schools indicated that engaging SLSOs and pre-service teachers as educators was beneficial because it helped overcome challenges with recruitment or redeployment of qualified teachers. Students had additional support people at the school they felt comfortable approaching, improving their wellbeing.

Leading a smaller class was valuable experience for SLSOs and pre-service teachers

Pre-service teachers and school leaders spoke of the valuable experience that pre-service teachers gained through their involvement in the program. This included developing lesson plans; using data to target students' learning needs; managing disengaged students; understanding how schools operate, including how to communicate across a school; and understanding how learning and support systems work. The opportunity to monitor student progress gave SLSOs significant satisfaction and a greater feeling of belonging in the school environment.

““ To reiterate what we said about our support for the program and how much we've enjoyed it professionally, how much it's developed us future teachers, and how we see the students responding every single day – it's been, yeah, a wonderful experience from my perspective.””

[Pre-service teacher]

““ It's sort of just given me quite a better perspective of what the classroom teachers do all the time ... to understand what you guys do in the classroom setting and how you go about doing it ... it's quite a nice learning curve for me.””

[SLSO]

The opportunity for SLSOs and pre-service teachers to work with qualified teachers was beneficial for both parties. For SLSOs and pre-service teachers, it offered the opportunity to learn from an experienced, qualified teacher, who could provide direct assistance. For the teachers, having an extra person in the classroom helped to reduce their burden, both with behavioural management and academic assistance.

Delivery of tuition sessions

Delivery of the tuition sessions varied by school, as schools had flexibility in delivery. The Grattan Institute's recommendations on group size, frequency and intensity were provided to schools as a guideline (NSW Department of Education 2022).

Schools valued flexibility in program delivery

Although the program was complex to implement, schools valued flexibility in being able to tailor the approach to the school's context and their students' needs. Schools felt this made it possible to reach more students and achieve better results. Schools were able to:

- tailor activities and programs to different groups of students
- integrate the program with ongoing learning and support programs
- engage a wide range of staff to deliver the program.

Flexibility also meant schools could change their approach as they improved their understanding of what worked best in their context, for example by adapting the timing, length or size of tuition groups to facilitate student engagement, and to better suit the needs of classroom teachers and educators.

Delivery models were mostly consistent with the Grattan Institute's recommendations, subject to staff availability

We used interviews, focus groups and tuition group PLAN2 implementation data to evaluate consistency of program delivery with the program guidelines. PLAN2 (Planning Literacy and Numeracy) is the department's software to support teachers in monitoring student learning. It is also the mandatory reporting tool that schools used to record student participation in the program, as well as information about their tuition groups.

Program delivery was mostly aligned with the Grattan Institute's recommended principles for implementation (Table 5):

- small groups of 2 to 5 students
- sessions of 20 to 50 minutes
- at least 3 sessions a week over 10 to 20 weeks.

In interviews and focus groups schools explained that it had often been an iterative process to arrive at their current settings and the program had evolved between when they first implemented it and when evaluators engaged with them.

Table 5

Tuition session delivery characteristics in 2022

Group characteristic		Primary student groups	Secondary student groups	All COVID ILSP groups
Totals^a	Tuition groups	36,264	14,410	50,674
Group focus^b	Literacy	23,122 (67.3%)	7,623 (57.8%)	30,745 (64.6%)
	Numeracy	11,251 (32.7%)	5,562 (42.2%)	16,813 (35.4%)
Group size	1 student	2,071 (5.7%)	1,030 (7.1%)	3,101 (6.1%)
	2–5 students	25,494 (70.3%)	9,895 (68.7%)	35,389 (69.8%)
	6 or more students	8,699 (24%)	3,485 (24.2%)	12,184 (24%)
Mode of delivery^b	Withdrawal	24,467 (83.9%)	8,506 (74.1%)	32,973 (81.1%)
	In class	4,225 (14.5%)	2,098 (18.3%)	6,323 (15.6%)
	Online	322 (1.1%)	256 (2.2%)	578 (1.4%)
	Before or after school	31 (<1%)	185 (1.6%)	216 (<1%)
	Other	113 (<1%)	432 (3.8%)	545 (1.3%)

^{a,b} Some schools did not complete the data entry required to identify a tuition group's focus or mode of delivery. These groups contribute to the total count of groups, but not to the counts or percentages for group focus or mode of delivery. Source: PLAN2 participation records, 2022.

Most tuition was delivered to groups of 2 to 5 students

Interviewees and focus groups reported that they aimed to maintain tuition groups with 5 or fewer students. Implementation data revealed that 70% of all groups had the recommended 2 to 5 students. As one school noted, and consistent with the broader research cited in the Grattan Institute's report (Sonnemann and Goss 2020):

“Once the number goes above 5, you start to lose the benefits.”

[ILSP coordinator]

Staff and students also discussed a preference for small groups. Within small groups, students can help each other learn and do not feel as isolated from their peers:

“If one student's still not getting it we, you know, throw over to another student to explain it and they understand it from their peer.”

[ILSP educator]

Some schools operated a one-on-one model, representing 6% of all tuition groups. In interviews and focus groups, schools that operated a one-on-one model said they did so to address specific students with additional needs (for example, recently arrived students learning English), and operated this model alongside the small group tuition component of the program.

The length of tuition session varied by school context and student needs

Session lengths often matched the length of school periods. However, sometimes schools realised that students would benefit from shorter sessions, either due to age or level of engagement. In these instances, schools described their success in designing lessons that were short, and engaged students for the whole session. Primary schools were more likely to have shorter sessions, while secondary schools had longer sessions (Table 6).

Table 6

Length of tutoring sessions in 2022

Session length	Primary student groups	Secondary student groups	All COVID ILSP groups
0–20 mins	8,403 (28.7%)	2,221 (19.3%)	10,624 (26.0%)
21–30 mins	10,334 (35.3%)	1,915 (16.6%)	12,249 (30.0%)
31–40 mins	5,151 (17.6%)	2,353 (20.4%)	7,504 (18.4%)
41–50 mins	5,379 (18.4%)	5,041 (43.7%)	10,420 (25.5%)

Source: PLAN2 full-year participation records, 2022.

Most tuition sessions were delivered at an evidence-guided frequency

Most tuition groups (75%) were reported as being delivered at the Grattan Institute's recommended frequency of 3 sessions a week (Table 7). However, tuition frequency and overall duration were the features of the program most vulnerable to staffing constraints. Although schools aimed for students to receive tutoring 3 times a week, this could be impacted by staffing shortages.

Schools reported that the program activity reporting tool, PLAN2, did not always have data collection options that reflected how the program was being implemented. For example, the only data entry options for reporting a group's frequency were 3, 4 or 5 times a week, but some schools said they ran groups less frequently than this. Additional frequency options were added to the tool in 2023. The 2022 records examined for this evaluation likely include groups that were delivered less frequently than 3 times a week.

Most groups were not delivered for the recommended 10 to 20 weeks

Of all program groups, 50% ran for less than 10 weeks of tuition while 41% ran for the recommended 10 to 20 weeks (Table 7). While schools generally aimed for cycle lengths of approximately 10 weeks to match term lengths, capacity constraints meant that some schools opted for shorter cycles. Some educators found this impacted the success of the program because it compromised the amount of content that could be delivered. However, some schools said that shorter cycles were better for engagement and kept cycles to between 5 and 10 weeks.

Table 7

Tuition frequency and tuition cycle length in 2022

Group characteristic	Primary student groups	Secondary student groups	All COVID ILSP groups
Sessions per week (tuition frequency)			
3	19,642 (67.2%)	10,804 (93.7%)	30,446 (74.7%)
4	6,841 (23.4%)	517 (4.5%)	7,358 (18%)
5	2,758 (9.4%)	209 (1.8%)	2,967 (7.3%)
Weeks of tuition (cycle length)			
Less than 10 weeks	14,700 (50.4%)	5,667 (49.3%)	20,367 (50.1%)
10–20 weeks	12,145 (41.6%)	4,561 (39.7%)	16,706 (41.1%)
More than 20 weeks	2,348 (8%)	1,262 (11%)	3,610 (8.9%)

Source: PLAN2 full-year participation records, 2022.

More tuition groups were focused on literacy than on numeracy

Approximately two-thirds of all tuition groups had a literacy focus, and the remaining third had a numeracy focus (Table 5 and Figure 2).

Schools aimed to conduct both literacy and numeracy streams under the program, but when capacity constraints meant only a single stream would function effectively, schools decided to focus on literacy. For instance, of the 20 schools in the interviews and focus groups, 4 ran literacy streams without a numeracy stream, however none of these 20 schools ran numeracy streams without a literacy counterpart.

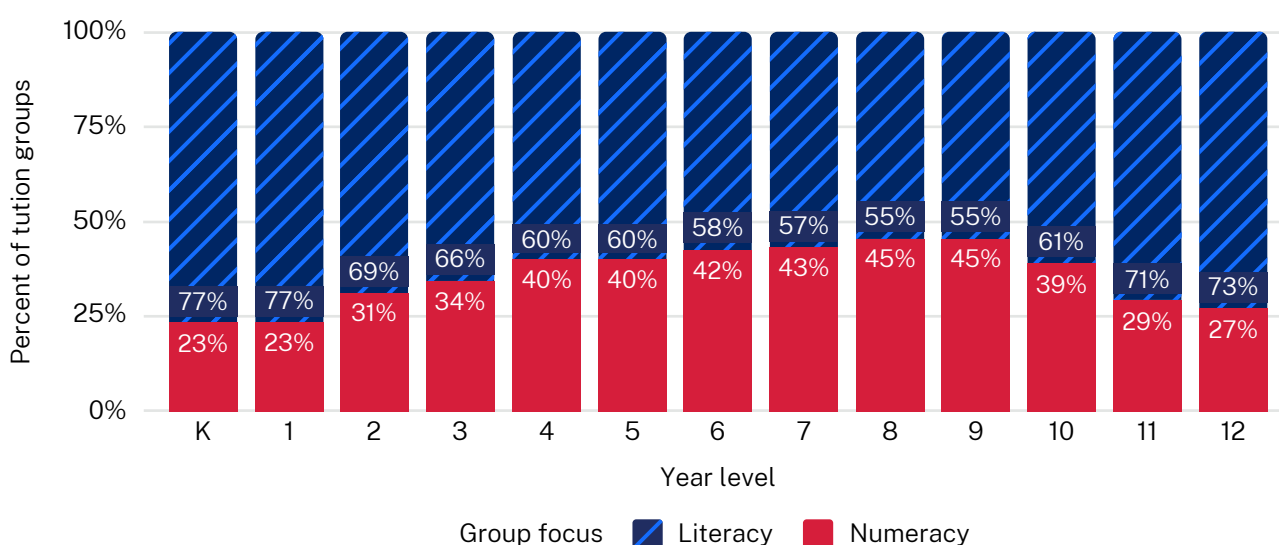
Schools focused on literacy ahead of numeracy because they considered core literacy more critical than numeracy for life skills. This was particularly the case for schools in socio-economically disadvantaged communities focusing their COVID ILSP tuition on lower ability students. Both primary and secondary schools without the capacity to conduct both streams decided that literacy would have more meaningful benefits for students.

The MiniLit (MultiLit n.d.) and MacqLit (MultiLit n.d.) programs assisted implementation of literacy tuition for primary school students. Schools reported that these externally developed programs were ideal to use in small group tuition. MiniLit is targeted at Year 1 or Year 2 students in the bottom 25% of the expected range for their age group, while MacqLit is targeted at students in the bottom 25% of a standardised reading test or curriculum-based measure from Year 3 through to high school (refer also to the section, 'Use of teaching and learning resources'). Although there are similar programs for numeracy, their use was less frequently reported by the schools that participated in interviews and focus groups.

The imbalance between literacy and numeracy tuition was largest in the early primary and late secondary year levels (Figure 2). In the early primary years, this may have been a result of the availability and familiarity of programs like MiniLit.

Figure 2

Proportion of tuition groups focused on literacy or numeracy, by year level



Source: PLAN2 participation data for 47,558 tuition groups with a recorded area of focus. Groups with missing tuition focus data are excluded.

Alignment of tuition material with class content was situation specific

The alignment of tuition content to classroom content varied between schools. Generally, school staff reported that aligning tuition and classroom content was easier in primary schools because of the greater focus on literacy and numeracy. Intervention programs such as MiniLit were already in use and part of the school routine.

Generally, secondary schools found it difficult to adapt regular class content to small group literacy tuition and said they would welcome guidance on how to do so.

Most tuition groups used the withdrawal model, but some schools used in-class delivery or a mix of models for different students

Definitions of tuition models: withdrawal and in-class

Withdrawal: If tuition occurred beyond the vicinity of a classroom, whether one-on-one or with a small group, this is referred to as 'withdrawal'. To supervise students in this way, the educator must be a qualified teacher.

In-class: Tuition within the classroom area was considered 'in-class'. This could involve an educator moving around a class and assisting students with ongoing classwork, or an educator taking a group of students to the back of a classroom during the class. Because the group of students is within the line of sight of the classroom teacher, the educator does not need to be a qualified teacher.

Most of the 20 schools in interviews and focus groups adopted a withdrawal model, where students were removed from their usual classroom to receive small group tuition. Some schools implemented the withdrawal model in conjunction with an in-class model. Only one of the 20 schools used a purely in-class model. Across the entire program, 81% of tuition groups were delivered by withdrawing students from their usual classroom instruction (Table 5).

The withdrawal model complements some of the key benefits of small group tuition: students have specifically designed lessons which are conducted in a quiet environment that provides individualised support. For more discussion on the benefits of small group tuition, refer to the section 'Key perceived benefits of small group tuition' ([page 53](#)).

Some schools initially adopted an in-class model but found that tutoring students within the physical boundaries of the classroom created distractions for the rest of the class. This prompted a move to a location outside of the classroom.

It is important to note that ‘in-class’ can refer to 2 different types of support within the classroom. In some schools, the in-class model was implemented as an educator assisting students with classwork, with students completing the same tasks as other students, rather than separating a group of students within the classroom. This type of support was used for EAL/D students, for example, to assist with the understanding of content. For classroom teachers, there was an extra person in the room. For students, there was an extra point of support to call on. This model also reduced the possible stigma associated with tutoring, which is discussed in the next section. Alternatively, if a group was withdrawn within the physical boundaries of the classroom, this would be defined as ‘in-class’, but students would still miss classroom content. Students missing out on class content can be a challenge with both models.

Some schools adopted an in-class model where the whole class would be split into groups to do work following an introduction from the teacher, with one of these groups being overseen by the ILSP educator. Schools found this model to be effective, however it is contingent on 2 key factors: a learning period structure where the class splits into groups, and tuition content being consistent with classroom content. However, participating students across all schools were often covering work different from class content (for example, MiniLit and MacqLit coursework).

Schools used different tuition approaches to best meet the needs of different types of students

Some schools used more than one approach to select students, and used different tuition approaches to meet the needs of specific groups of students. For example, one secondary school with a high proportion of students with a language background other than English adopted:

- the withdrawal model for students requiring targeted additional support
- intensive reading support for students recently arrived in Australia
- in-class SLSO support for EAL/D students
- after-school tuition for a range of students, including self-referrals.

In a school for students with intellectual disability, COVID ILSP support boosted staff to student ratios to enable more intensive focus on students’ literacy.

The schools that we spoke to with a high proportion of Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students tailored their tuition approach to their student population in several ways including:

- conducting the tutoring in a culturally safe space, incorporating the local language and ways of learning, and using culturally appropriate resources such as reading books
- taking lessons outside where possible, and incorporating movement or sport into the learning process.

Selection of students

Schools had flexibility to select students for the program within the overall guidance of selecting students who had fallen behind in their learning during the learning from home periods in 2020 and 2021.

The program was delivered to a diverse range of students

Of the 2,187 schools funded to deliver the program in 2022, 2,068 schools (95%) reported their student participants with the PLAN2 tool. A total of 138,268 students, 17% of all NSW government school students, were reported as having participated in the program in 2022.

Students selected to participate in the program were demographically different from the general NSW government school population (Table 8). Although the trends vary by school and geography, when compared to the entire NSW government school population:

- Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander students were more likely to have been participants in the program
- students with disability were more likely to have been participants
- students at socio-educational disadvantage were more likely to have been participants²
- students who are learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D) or who have a language background other than English (LBOTE) were less likely to have been participants.

² Socio-educational advantage (SEA) is an estimate of the effects of socio-economic factors on a student's education outcomes. SEA is estimated for each student using information about their parents' level of education and occupation.

Table 8
Demographics of participants compared to the government school cohort

Student characteristics		COVID ILSP participants	All NSW government school students
Totals	Students	138,268	791,435
Aboriginality	Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander	19,508 (14.1%)	70,939 (9.0%)
	Not Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander	118,760 (85.9%)	720,496 (91.0%)
Learning English as an additional language or dialect (EAL/D)	Yes	31,314 (22.6%)	198,185 (25.0%)
	No	106,954 (77.4%)	593,250 (75.0%)
Language background other than English (LBOTE)	Yes	41,193 (29.8%)	296,166 (37.4%)
	No	97,075 (70.2%)	495,269 (62.6%)
Students with disability	Any level of adjustment for disability (NCCD*)	49,909 (36.1%)	189,151 (23.9%)
	No identified disability	88,359 (63.9%)	602,284 (76.1%)
Gender	Female	67,507 (48.8%)	382,109 (48.3%)
	Male	70,761 (51.2%)	409,326 (51.7%)
Socio-educational advantage (SEA) quartiles	1 (least advantaged)	50,804 (36.9%)	193,238 (24.7%)
	2	42,644 (31%)	196,520 (25.1%)
	3	27,729 (20.1%)	195,474 (24.9%)
	4 (most advantaged)	16,499 (12.0%)	198,337 (25.3%)

*NCCD: Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability.

Sources: Student enrolment mid-year census; PLAN2 full-year participation records, 2022.

Schools used a range of criteria to select participants

Schools varied in how they selected students for the program. Some schools solely targeted students whose progress had slowed during learning from home. Often this meant targeting students who were significantly below stage level, but sometimes it was middle-range students who had been most impacted by learning from home.

Other schools took into account additional factors such as:

- students who had experienced schooling from home during important transition years such as Kindergarten or Year 7
- students who teachers considered would benefit most from targeted tuition, including if they would be able to participate frequently
- school-level literacy and numeracy targets
- students with additional learning needs or behavioural support needs, although some schools explained they had alternative and more suitable learning and support programs in place for these students.

NAPLAN often informed student selection

Schools often identified NAPLAN assessments as a focal point for selecting students. A perception of ongoing pressure to meet school-level NAPLAN targets prompted some schools to orient the program to support reaching these targets.

However, schools also explained that the program may not have had enough time to achieve sustained improvements in students' academic outcomes, and so impacts may not be reflected in NAPLAN scores.

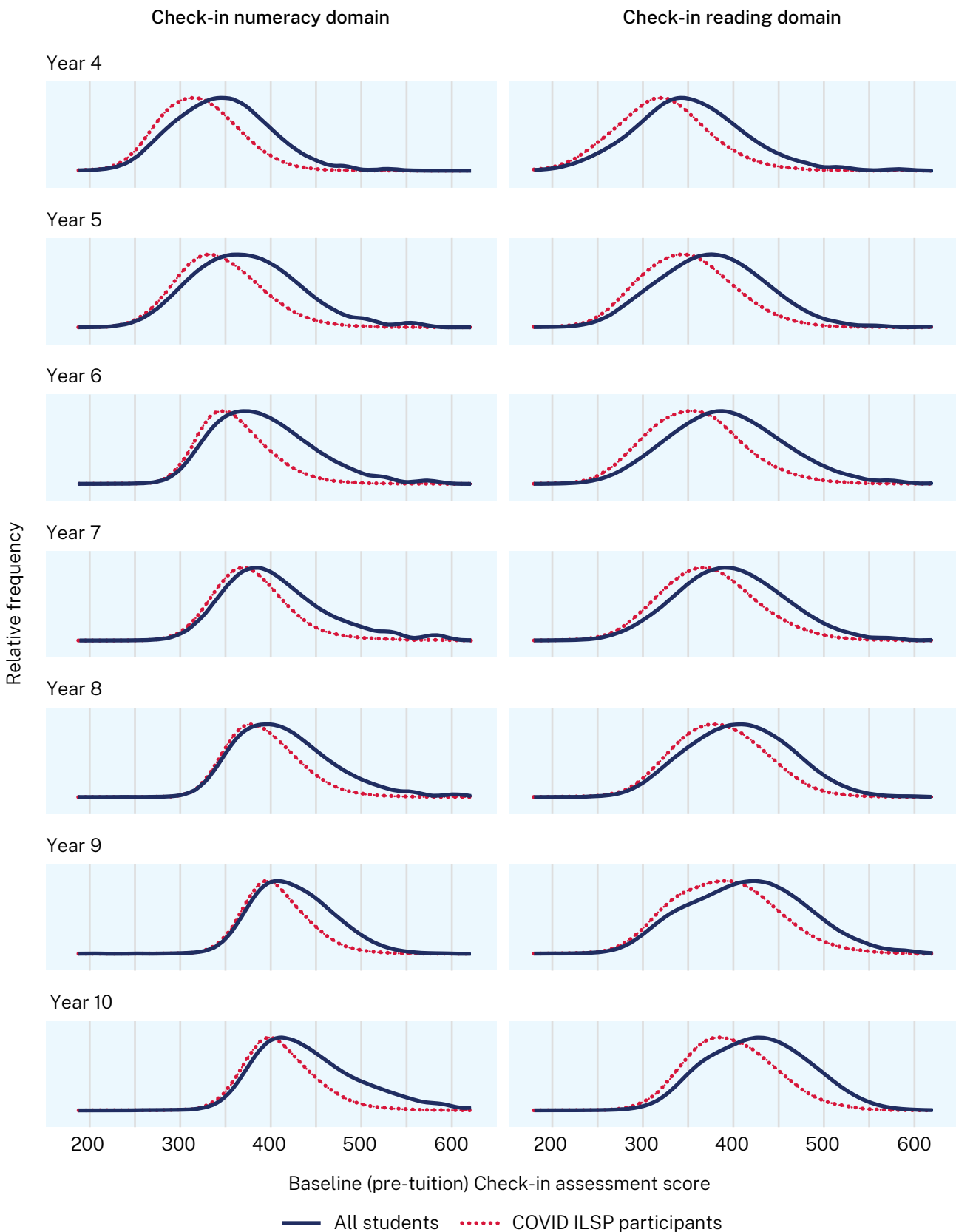
Baseline Check-in assessment results were lower for participants

Prior to small group tuition, participants had lower results in numeracy and reading at their most recent Check-in assessment prior to starting the program (Figure 3). The difference between participants and their cohort varied by year level and individual, but was on average 30 to 50 units lower on the Check-in scale, often equivalent to the results of students in the year level below. This suggests that schools generally selected students at most need of tuition in reading or numeracy. However, a small proportion of students selected to participate in the program had baseline Check-in results that were equal to or better than the averages for their year levels.

More details on the Check-in assessment and its use in this evaluation are in the section 'Program effect on academic growth' ([page 77](#)).

Figure 3

Comparison of baseline numeracy and reading Check-in assessment scores between participants and their year level cohort



Source: Check-in assessment results 2021; PLAN2 participation data 2022. Curves are kernel density estimates normalised to equal height, for comparability. Year levels are for 2022, at the time students participated in COVID ILSP.

Use of assessments to monitor progress

Schools used a variety of assessments to monitor students' progress at different points throughout the program.

Schools used frequent assessments to monitor progress

During interviews and focus groups, schools reported that they performed assessments before, during and after students' involvement in the program. Staff used assessment data in conjunction with educator and teacher observations to gain a holistic understanding of students' progress.

- Pre-program assessments supported student selection for the program. These assessments were also often used to group students (by identifying common learning needs) and to inform lesson design. Schools that did not use pre-program assessment data tended to say their initial student groupings were not effective, or that lessons were initially pitched at the wrong ability level.
- Assessments conducted during the program helped schools monitor progress, and ensured lessons remained appropriate to students' needs. These assessments also allowed students to observe their own success and progress and build self-confidence.
- Post-program assessments allowed schools to assess the short-term impact of the program and whether students would benefit from ongoing assistance.

Schools also emphasised how they used assessment data to inform the design of nuanced lessons and to monitor progress. They identified gaps in specific elements of students' literacy and numeracy learning requiring additional support and then worked with students to develop goals that could be achieved with directed assistance.

Many schools reported increased use of data and student monitoring. This is discussed in the section 'Perceived impact of the program on schools' practices and staff capabilities and learning and support approaches' ([page 72](#)).

The most common tools to monitor student progress were Check-in assessments, class-based assessments, and literacy and numeracy progressions

Schools used a variety of tools to monitor student progress. The 3 most common tools were Check-in assessments, class-based assessments, and the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions (Figure 4). Most staff reported using each of these types of assessments, regardless of their role.

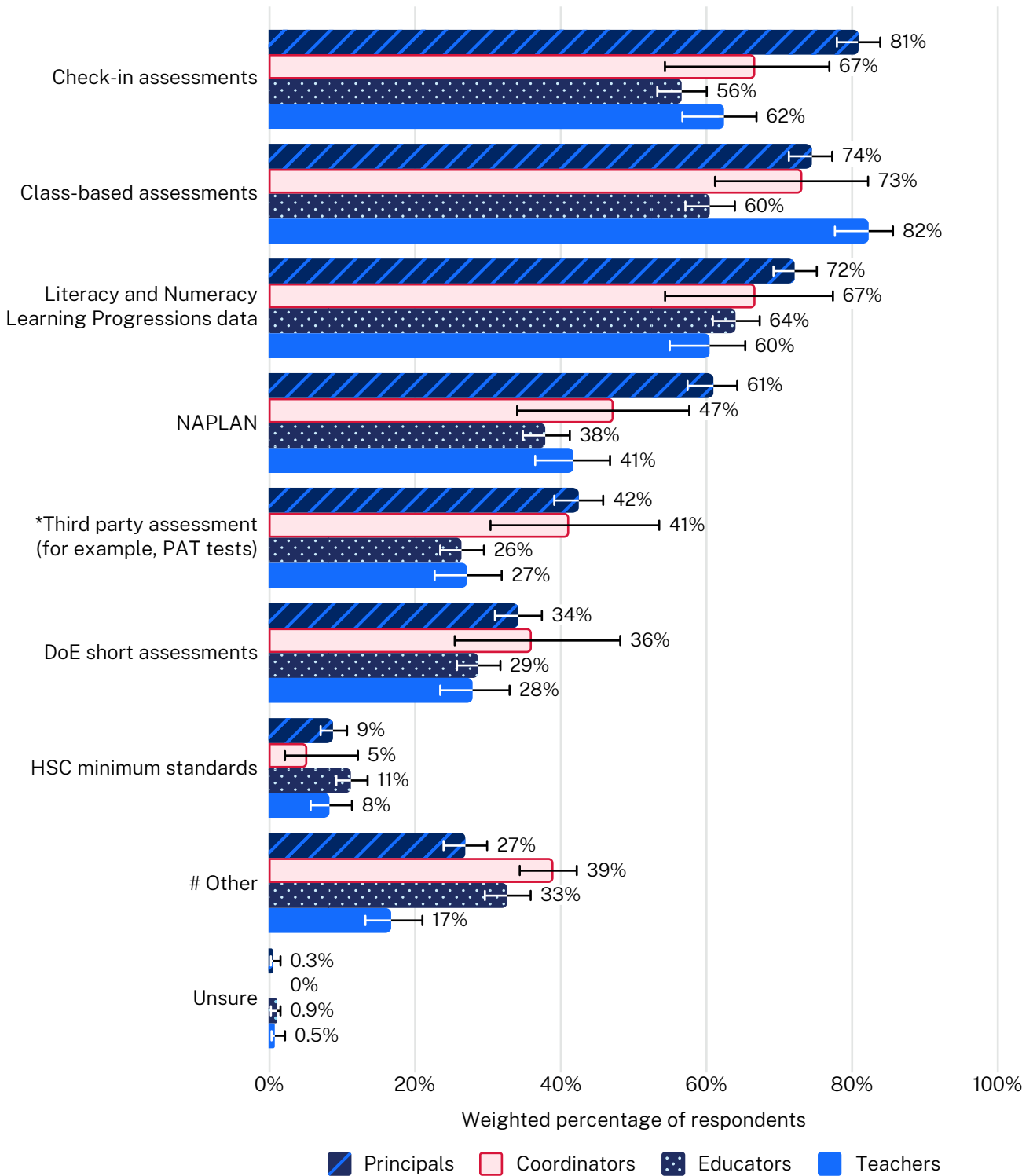
There were some variations in responses by role: principals were more likely than teachers and educators to report use of the Check-in and NAPLAN assessments, and teachers were more likely than educators to report use of class-based assessments (Figure 4). Principals may have a holistic view of the variety of assessments used by different staff across their school while educators and teachers may each use different assessments to gain their own view of student progress.

Schools also used a variety of third party assessments to monitor student progress. Progressive Achievement Tests (PAT) and MiniLit and MacqLit were mentioned most frequently. Other tools included Essential Assessment and the Phonological Awareness Diagnostic Assessment.

Figure 4

Types of assessments used to monitor student progress*

(n=2,138)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘What assessments have you used to monitor student progress?’.

* PAT: Progressive Achievement Tests.

‘Other’ responses included PAT, MacqLit/MiniLit, Essential Assessment, internal school-based assessments, and others. Appendix 7 of the Technical report has more information.

+ Not all of these assessments are frequent enough to show progress during the timescale of the program intervention and may represent a more general tracking of progress.

Schools value PLAN2, but it is not always part of business-as-usual monitoring and assessment

PLAN2 (Planning Literacy and Numeracy) is the department's software to support teachers in monitoring student learning, using the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions. It is also the mandatory reporting tool that schools used to record student participation in the COVID ILSP.

Schools highlighted that PLAN2 is a valuable platform that helps to provide a well-rounded indication of students' progress in the program. The information can be accessed by multiple teachers and staff, now and in the future, and used to establish students' learning gaps. Some schools wanted PLAN2 to remain a key component of schools' monitoring and assessment beyond the program (where it is not already).

Several schools used PLAN2 for assessments before, during and after the program. Educators entered data into PLAN2 if they knew how to, or the COVID ILSP coordinator did. At some schools the COVID ILSP was a catalyst for educators and teachers who had not yet learned how to use PLAN2 to do so. In contrast, several schools said that they had not had time to participate in the relevant training, and so had not yet incorporated PLAN2 into their day-to-day ways of working.

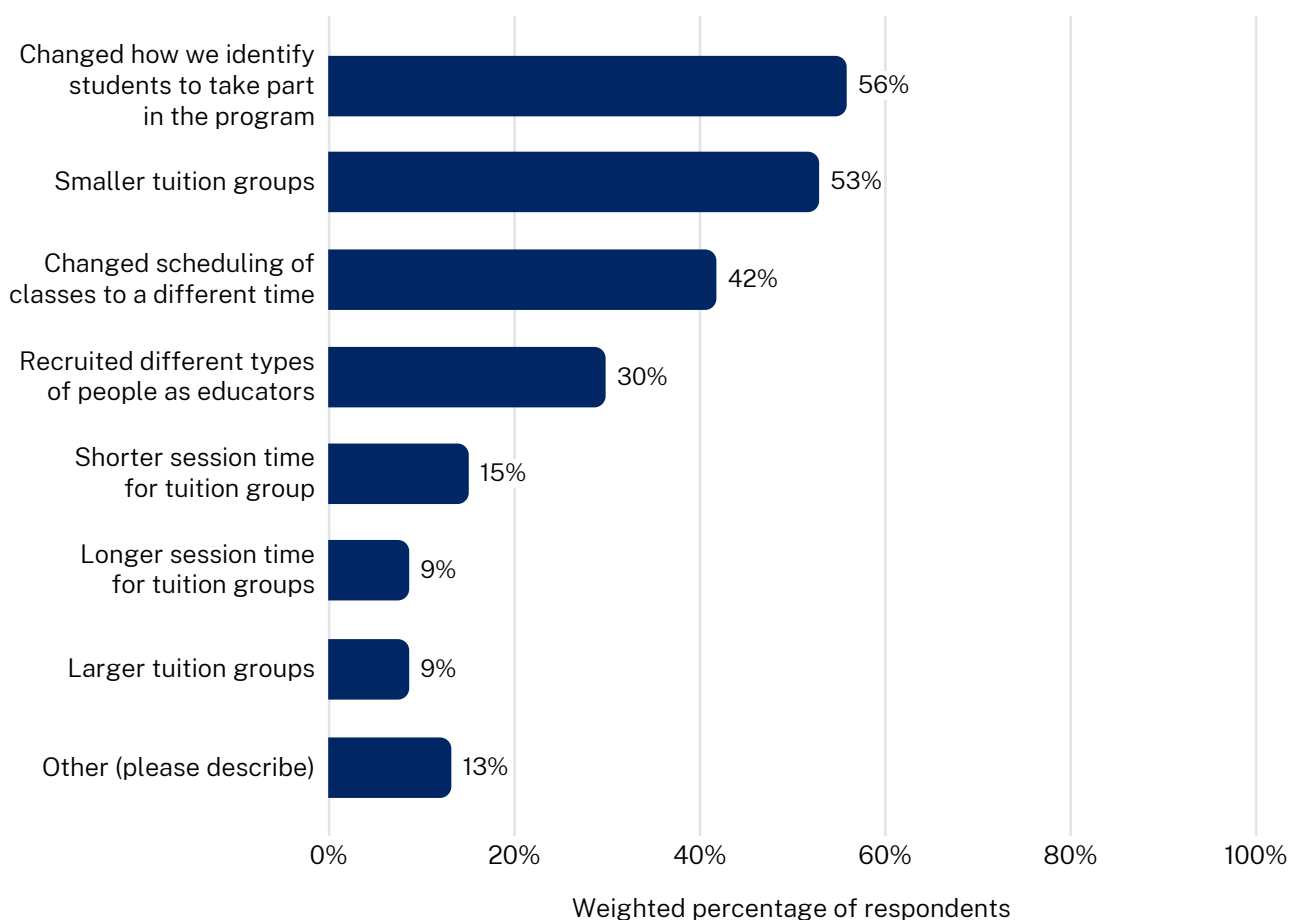
Changes to program implementation

Almost half the respondents to the staff survey (43%) said their school had changed their approach to delivering the program since it had started. The most commonly reported changes were changing how the school identified students to take part in the program (56%), creating smaller tuition groups (53%) and scheduling classes to a different time (42%) (Figure 5).

Figure 5

Types of changes to implementation since the program began

(n=1,348 respondents reporting changes in their school)



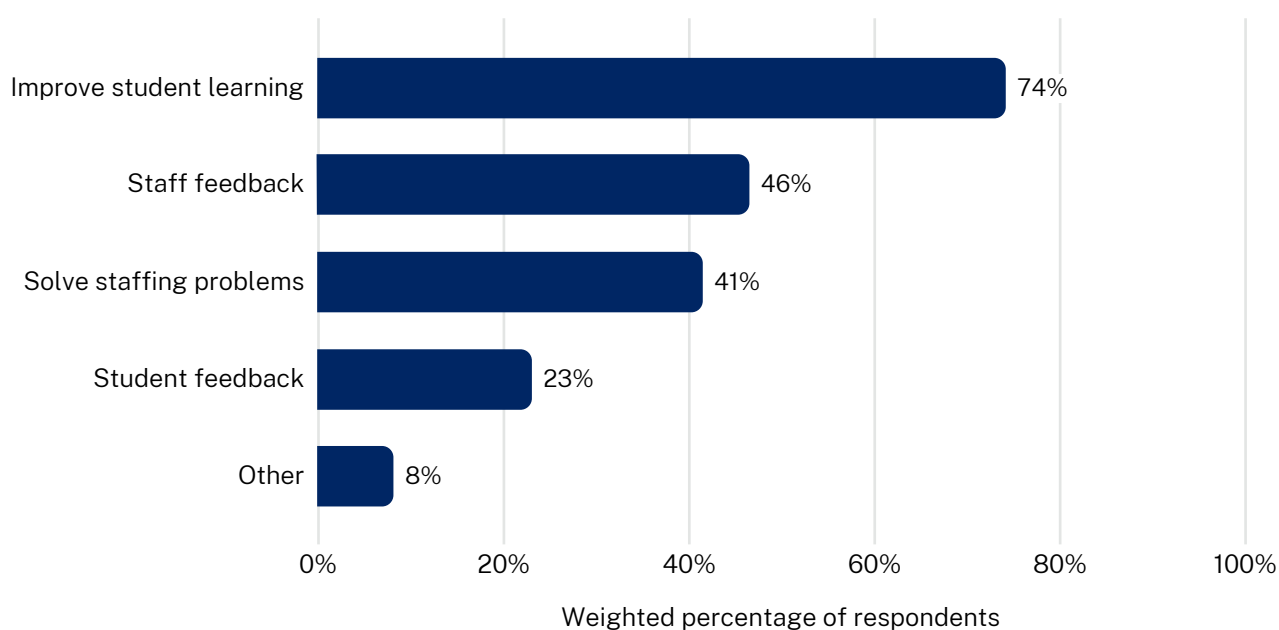
Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: 'What kind of changes has your school made? (select all that apply)'.

The main reasons for the changes were to improve student learning (74%), to respond to staff feedback (46%) or student feedback (23%), and to solve staffing problems (41%) (Figure 6). Most schools in the interviews and focus groups reported that they reduced their use of qualified teachers as educators during 2021 and 2022 to overcome staffing challenges, and relied more on SLSOs and pre-service teachers.

Figure 6

Reasons for changes to program implementation

(n=1,348 respondents reporting changes in their school)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘What were the reasons for the changes your school has made? (select all that apply)’.

Online implementation model

Schools in high priority staffing areas were offered the option of using the department’s online tuition model. Only a small proportion of the total small group tuition in 2022 used online delivery. However, for the schools that used this model, it was often the only viable method of program implementation, and the only viable workforce strategy.

It was difficult to find suitable candidates for the teaching roles required for the new online model. Alternative recruitment pathways were explored, and the team identified a pool of quality teachers from other educational systems, new graduates, and educators who were returning from leave or were currently on leave from their existing positions but expressed willingness to participate.

Thirty-two fully qualified teachers, a full-time equivalent workforce of 21.4, were employed to deliver COVID ILSP remotely, forming the COVID ILSP Online Delivery team. These educators delivered live, online targeted literacy and numeracy lessons during school hours, using modern digital engagement strategies and software. The Online Delivery educators received professional learning on online engagement strategies, digital pedagogy, and literacy and numeracy.

The Online Delivery team planned, programmed, developed and delivered multimodal lessons explicitly designed to align to the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions and to meet specific student needs at participating schools. The team created an online lesson library of over 5,500 lessons that could be shared, edited and differentiated for future use. The team also analysed student data and the unique learning needs of students and schools to identify students to participate in the program and to align the lessons to students at their point of need.

Small schools, by combining their COVID ILSP funding and resources, gained access to a broader range of literacy and numeracy support and educational programs. In some small schools, students from several schools could be combined into tuition groups, giving some students their first opportunity to interact with school peers their own age. This approach allowed the Online Delivery team to group students according to their specific abilities, irrespective of their geographic location. In every year level, students were able to connect with others of similar abilities, facilitating access to and equity in learning support.

Over 10-week cycles in Terms 2, 3 and 4 2022, the team delivered 237 small group tuition sessions per week to 759 students at 26 schools. A total of 7,603 online small group tuition sessions were delivered to students in small schools, Connected Communities schools and schools in regional, rural and remote NSW.

Compared to the overall COVID ILSP participants, a higher proportion of students from an Aboriginal and/or Torres Strait Islander background participated in the online delivery model, making up 56% of online delivery participants, compared to 14% of all COVID ILSP students. A higher proportion of online delivery students were in the lowest quartile of socio-educational advantage (65%) compared to all COVID ILSP students (37%). These differences reflect the demographic composition of the schools that used the online delivery model.

In addition to the time spent delivering online lessons, the Online Delivery team provided a total of 377 hours of targeted school support in 2022. This additional support included onboarding assistance through face-to-face school visits, targeted professional learning in literacy and numeracy, PLAN2, engagement strategies and direct technological support. The Online Delivery team also took responsibility for student data tracking in PLAN2, student growth data analysis and student reporting and feedback.

Enablers of successful implementation

Based on interviews and focus groups with schools, there were 3 key enablers to successful implementation of the program: active support and clear direction from school leaders, dedicated resourcing for the program coordinator, and strong communication and collaboration within the school.

Active support and clear direction from school leaders

The majority of the schools used the withdrawal model for tuition sessions. This naturally causes disruptions to day-to-day class functioning. During the early stages of the program this led to vocal displeasure from classroom teachers in some schools. Schools reported that it was effective to have school leaders clearly articulate the reasons for prioritising the COVID ILSP, and explain the benefits to students that would likely translate to the classroom. In some schools, school leaders declared that the program would be a priority for these reasons.

School leaders explained that this clear direction often helped get classroom teachers' support. However, there were still instances where teachers were reluctant to have students withdrawn from their class. The role of coordinators in mediating such instances in the next section.

School leaders were also important when explaining the purpose of the program to parents and carers. Some schools said that parents and carers were initially reluctant to have their child participate in the program, believing it indicated their child was struggling. School leaders explained that the program was a way to support their children and supplement learning lost to COVID-19 disruptions. Once this was articulated, parents and carers were more agreeable: one school mentioned that parents and carers called and requested their children be included in the program.

Dedicated resourcing for the program coordinator

Program coordinators were instrumental in ensuring the smooth implementation of the program. In several schools that participated in interviews and focus groups, the coordinator acted as an intermediary between educators, classroom teachers and school leaders, and each of these groups of staff spoke of the importance of the coordinators to the success of the program. Generally coordinators were already in roles at the school, such as assistant principals, former learning and support leaders, or teachers.

Classroom teachers were at times apprehensive about a program that would reduce the hours students spent in their classrooms. A key role of the coordinator was to timetable program tuition such that it did not disproportionately impact any classes more than others. In some schools, this was a logistical challenge, given students in tuition groups were from different year levels. Ensuring classroom teachers were aware when students were being withdrawn from their classes was also imperative, as this was one of the most significant frustrations teachers raised.

In schools where educators either did not have the capacity and/or the ability to input data into PLAN2, coordinators also took on this role. Given the benefits of clearly monitoring student progress, this was an important role and helped feed information to the school executive.

Coordinators were often experienced educators with an acute understanding of learning and support, and so were also able to assist with lesson design for tuition groups. Their familiarity with monitoring data strengthened their ability to perform this task. While some schools had the resources to appoint a 'lead tutor' to mentor less experienced educators, many did not, and so mentoring became the coordinator's responsibility.

One school principal commented that systems and processes were needed for the coordinator's role, to ensure the program could continue to operate should that person not be available:

““ It can't be just the person ... there has to be paper around the role. So if [the dedicated coordinator] wasn't to be here, with her documentation and this system that she's set in place, someone could step into that role. So I think that's the sustainability thing that we've established.””

[School leader]

Strong communication and collaboration within the school

Schools that had most effectively implemented the program had integrated educators as a core part of the school's learning and support department. This meant there was ongoing discussion between educators and classroom teachers about both the timings of withdrawals, and the progress of students. Discussions about student progress were not limited to assessment results, but also covered students' general attitude within class. These conversations were either facilitated by coordinators, or filtered up to them, so they had effective oversight of the functioning of the program, both through a logistical and an outcomes lens. This could then be communicated to the school executive.

Evaluation question 2: What was the perceived impact of the program on student learning and engagement?

Overall, both staff and students perceived a positive impact of the program on students' learning and engagement.

Staff surveys in 2022 with principals, program coordinators, educators and classroom teachers indicate that a vast majority of staff perceive the program has had a positive impact on students' learning progress, as well as students' confidence, engagement and motivation. A very high proportion of staff reported the program improved students' learning progress: 97% of coordinators, 97% of educators, 95% of principals and 81% of classroom teachers. A similarly high proportion of educators and teachers felt the program had improved students' confidence (95%), engagement (93%) and motivation (90%).

Student surveys in 2022 indicate that most students felt they were doing a little or a lot better at school since they participated in the program: 89% of primary students and 79% of secondary students. In focus groups, students indicated they liked that the tutor had the time and capacity in the smaller group setting to explain concepts in different ways and at a slower pace and felt the tutors could provide more attention to them than a teacher could in a larger class.

In interviews and focus groups, staff suggested that more time may be needed to realise measurable benefits of the small group tuition to students' academic outcomes. Changing circumstances in the first part of 2022 meant it took schools time to establish a well-functioning implementation model on a scale sufficient to address learning gaps that were caused, or exacerbated, by COVID-19.

Perceived impact on learning progress

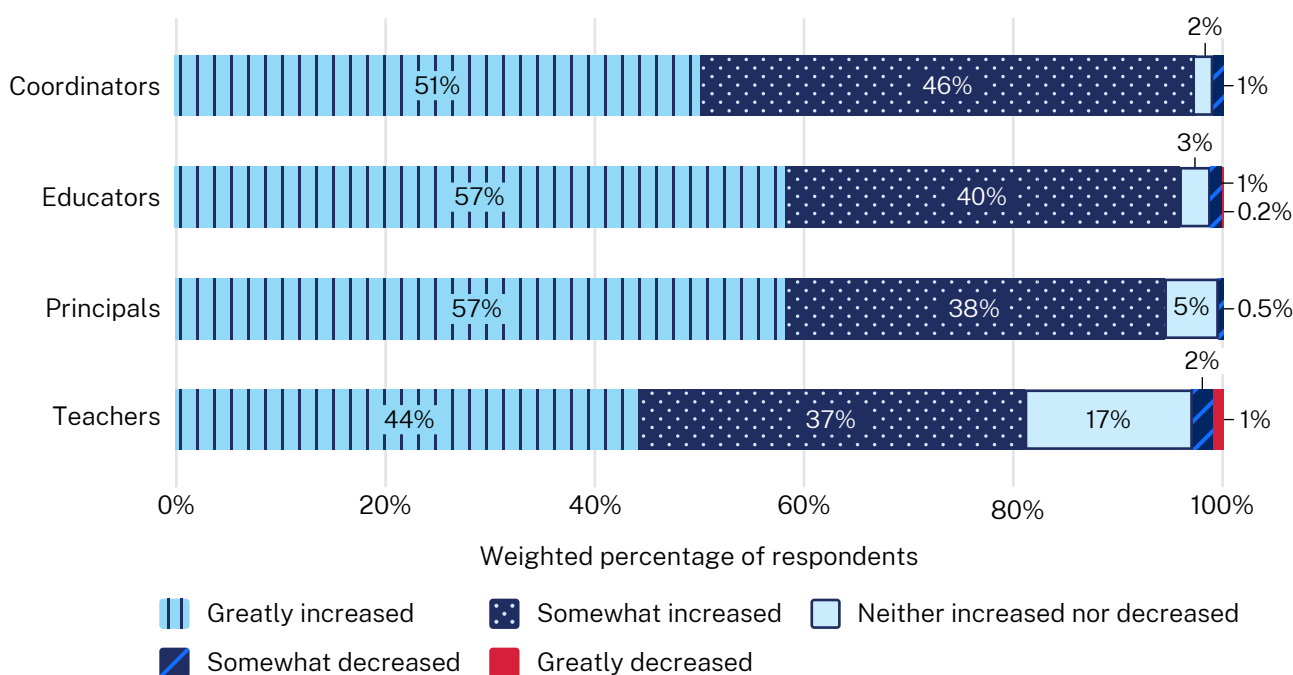
Most staff said that the program improved students' learning progress

Staff said that the program had increased students' learning progress to some degree (Figure 7). Over 50% of coordinators, educators and principals and 44% of classroom teachers felt that the program had 'greatly increased' learning progress, with most others reporting that it had 'somewhat increased' learning progress.

In interviews, most staff said that the program had increased students' learning progress. They reported seeing improvements through their pre and post assessments, or students moving up learning progressions. However, the rate and degree of improvement varied among students, and this was often impacted by students' attendance or the continuity of the program.

Figure 7

Perceived impact of the program on students' learning progress, by role (n=2,811)



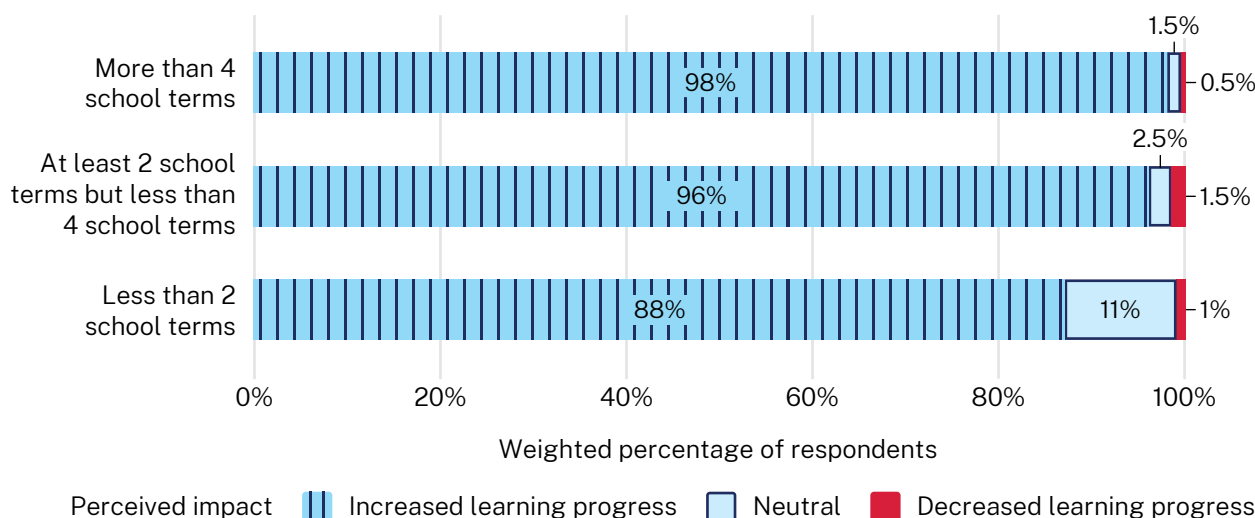
Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: 'What impact has the COVID ILSP had on the learning progress of students?'

Note: Due to rounding, the sum of the categories may not add up to 100%.

Educators' perceived impact of the program on students' learning progress increased as the number of terms the educator had been delivering small group tuition for the program increased (Figure 8).

Figure 8

Educators' perception of impact by time delivering small group tuition (n=1,114)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey questions: 'How long have you been delivering small group tuition for the COVID ILSP?' and 'What impact has the COVID ILSP had on the learning progress of students?'

Note: Due to rounding, the sum of the categories may not add up to 100%.

Coordinators and educators who reported increased learning progress were asked what types of evidence they had to support this. The types of evidence most commonly used were:

- observations, cited by 85% of coordinators and 88% of educators
- assessment results, cited by 80% of coordinators and 74% of educators
- student engagement, cited by 75% of coordinators and 76% of educators
- teacher judgment, cited by 74% of coordinators and 73% of educators
- student progress against the learning progressions, cited by 66% of coordinators and 63% of educators.

Many staff who participated in interviews and focus groups reported an improvement in students' understanding of concepts and ability to complete work. Most comments related to literacy skills, likely reflecting that more tuition groups focused on literacy than numeracy. Examples of students' improvements included:

- spelling, writing, reading and pronunciation of words
- expanded vocabulary
- ability to write more complex words and longer paragraphs
- comprehension and summation of ideas
- increased learning capacity – students' ability to learn by themselves, rely less on the teacher, and understand what they should focus on
- students demonstrating an interest in and having the confidence to read more books
- improved technology skills
- better understanding of maths concepts.

““ At the start of the year when I started teaching this particular group of students English, I would not have thought that by Term 4 we would be writing an essay. I would have said, ‘You’re kidding, no way’. Even with guided instructions I wouldn’t have thought it was possible. I think it’s helping with their efficacy in English, but also helping them feel like learners.””

[Classroom teacher]

Students also believed their learning had improved due to the program

Most surveyed students, 89% of primary students and 79% of secondary students, perceived that they are doing ‘a little better’ or ‘a lot better’ at school since they joined the program. The Technical report has results by year level.

Most students in the focus groups reported they had improved their understanding of concepts and their ability to complete work. Their main examples included improvements in maths, writing, spelling, reading, pronunciation of words and understanding of English (particularly for EAL/D students).

Some students reported increased dedication to academic performance, greater motivation in improving their skills, and a stronger interest in learning including increased ownership of their learning through goal setting, and thinking practically about their future aspirations and how to get there.

Students' reflections were supported by the small selection of parents and carers interviewed. One said their child had previously struggled with school, and has now received a dedication to schooling award. Others saw a noticeable improvement in their child's literacy, with stronger reading and comprehension, and better exam results.

““ If she's having those little intimate groups, and having those little confidence boosts, then that's what works for her – I would definitely put it down to the program.””

[Parent/carer]

““ Her reading has gone the fastest, has excelled the fastest ... she'll sit in the room and open up a book and start reading and we're like, 'who is this child?'””

[Parent/carer]

Schools felt that benefits to academic outcomes have not yet been fully realised

Schools believed program impacts on academic outcomes would not yet be fully realised. It took time for schools to embed their implementation model due to the changing circumstances throughout 2021 and 2022. Schools also felt it would take more than 2 years to address the learning gaps that were caused, or exacerbated, by COVID-19.

When reviewing individual student data to gauge student progress, some staff (across all roles) were cautious in making judgments before seeing 2 years of data. Other staff acknowledged that other factors, such as other learning and support initiatives, would also be contributing to improvements.

Key factors in achieving learning progress

Staff were asked about the most important factors for increasing the learning progress of students in small group tuition. The top 3 factors (Figure 9) were:

- the frequency of small group sessions
- identifying the students best suited to the program
- the quality of the relationship between educators and students.

More than 50% of staff across all roles said the frequency of small group tuition sessions was an important contributor to students' learning progress. This was consistent with the views expressed during the school visits.

School staff opinions were largely similar across the different categories of staff, but differed on the following:

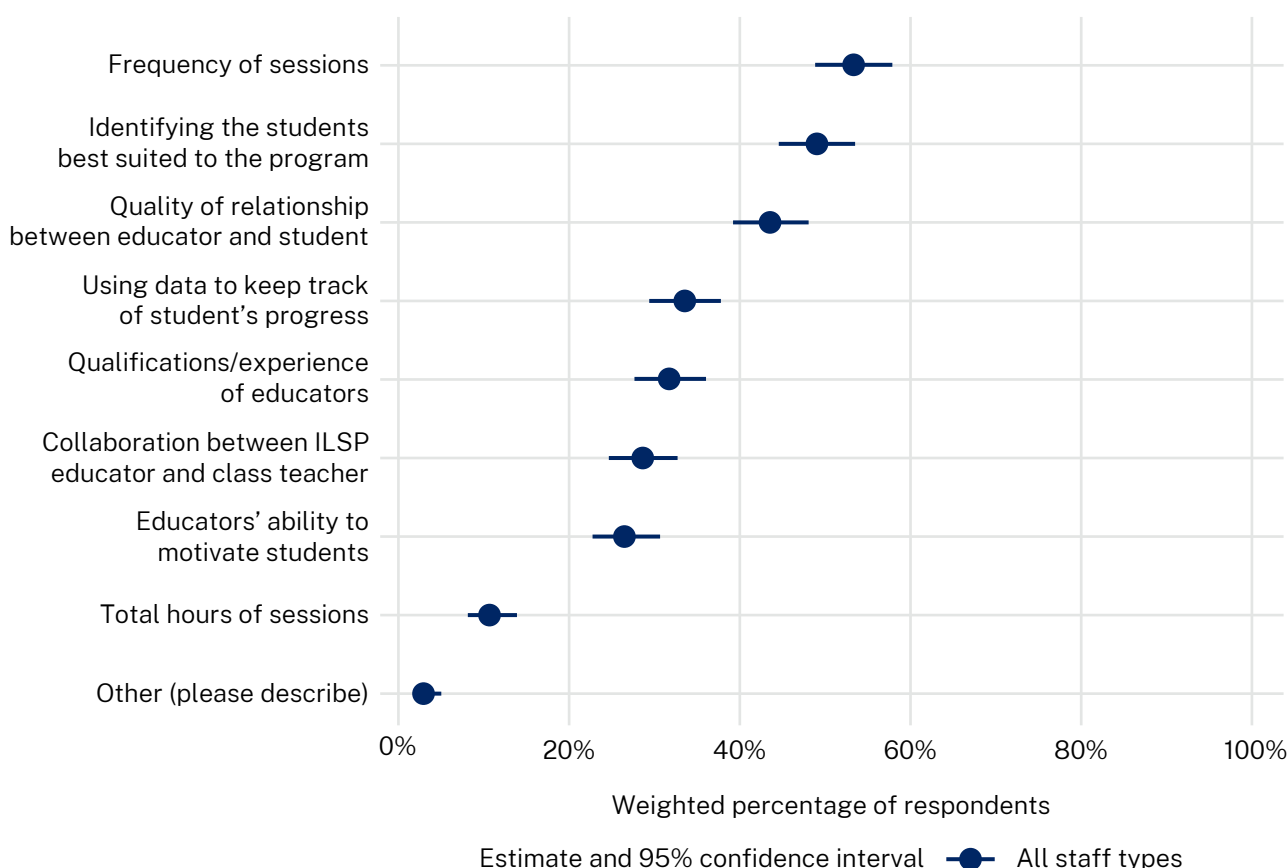
- Educators rated the quality of the relationship between educators and staff as more important than other staff did. Educators may have more exposure than other staff to the relationships they are developing with students.
- Principals and coordinators highlighted the importance of using data to track students’ progress, and the qualifications and experience of educators. This may be because experienced staff appreciate the importance of accurate data collection and having qualified staff to deliver high quality interventions.
- Teachers tended to rate identifying students best suited to the program as more important than other staff did.

The Technical report has details of differences by staff role.

Figure 9

Staff views of the most important factors for increasing students’ learning progress in small group tuition

(n=2,538)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘What have been the most important factors in small group tuition for increasing the learning progress of students? (choose up to 3)’.

Perceived impact on students' confidence and engagement

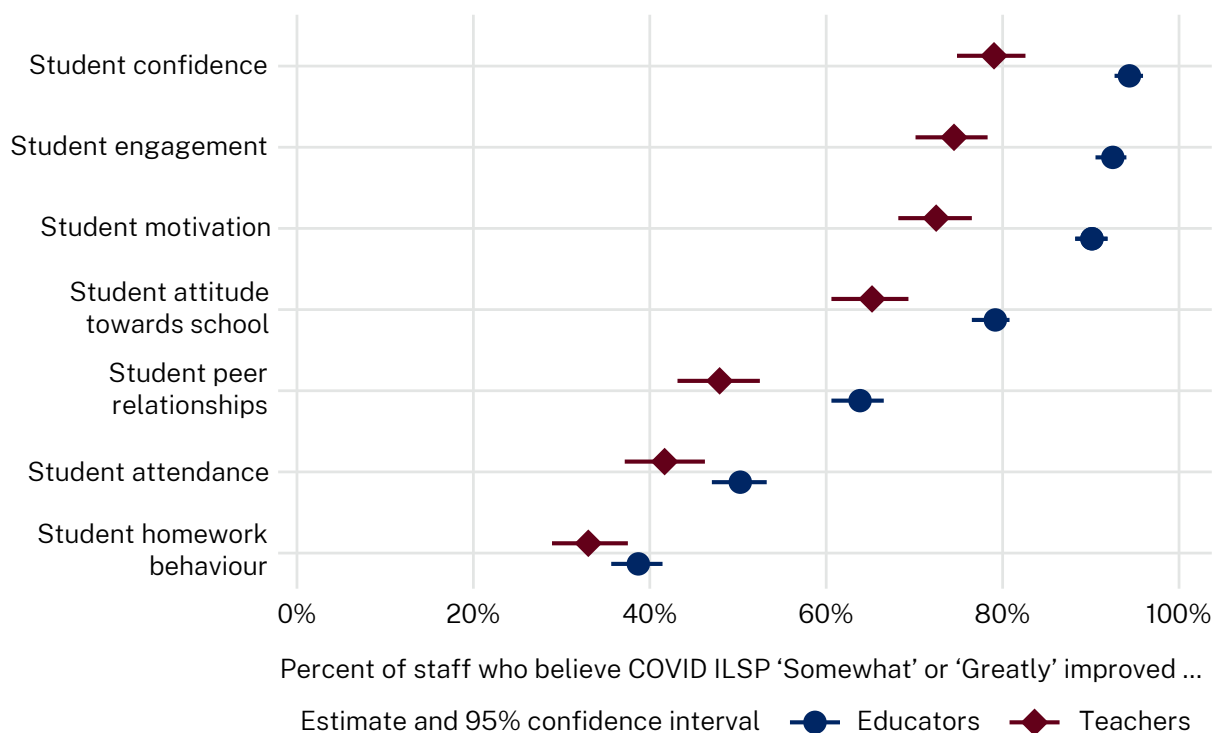
Staff felt that the program improved students' confidence and engagement

Most educators and classroom teachers in the staff survey felt that the program had improved students' confidence, engagement, motivation, and attitude towards school and peer relationships (Figure 10). Educators' perceptions were more positive than classroom teachers' perceptions on all aspects. Educators reported that students demonstrated more engagement and confidence in the small group sessions than in the classroom, as some students continued to find the classroom environment challenging. Educators may have been more likely to observe these improvements than classroom teachers.

Figure 10

Educator and classroom teacher perceptions of the impact of the program on students

(n=1,162 ILSP educators and 489 classroom teachers)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: 'What impact has the COVID ILSP had on ... ?'.

During interviews and focus groups, school leaders and coordinators, and some teachers, reported that students tended to show greater confidence and engagement in the classroom environment after tutoring, but not in all cases.

Some of these perceived impacts included:

- students' higher engagement, with more discussion, asking more questions in class, and improved ability to learn in class with less support
- students' ability to focus for longer, and improved learning and reading stamina
- students' greater resilience, which meant they participated more in class as they had greater belief in their abilities and were not so afraid to get things wrong
- students' greater confidence in reading
- students helping each other in the classroom.

School leaders and coordinators, and some teachers, also noted some students displayed less emotional or aggressive behaviour. They suggested that students may have behaved this way previously because they may not have understood the class content. Educators noted that students appeared to be calmer in small group tuition sessions. One coordinator said that a break from the classroom for small group sessions, often with game-based and kinaesthetic learning, was beneficial for students, and helped improve their behaviour when back in the classroom.

Students reported improvements in their confidence and engagement

In focus groups, students spoke positively about the impact of tutoring on their confidence and engagement.

““ I felt I was always the one at the very bottom of stuff – I couldn't read or write, but when I started this they taught me how to read and write. I feel now like I can achieve anything.””

[Student]

Many students said they liked that the tutors were able to provide more attention to each individual and could explain concepts in different ways and at a slower pace. The students also enjoyed the game-based learning, as this fostered motivation and helped them stay engaged.

Several students noted they felt more comfortable asking questions and answering harder questions in the smaller groups, and some said it improved their understanding of work back in the classroom. While there was some reported improvement, student engagement and confidence to participate in the classroom still depended on the teacher and the learning environment the teacher created. Some students still felt intimidated in larger classes, fearing judgment from other students.

One of the parent/carer interviewees said the program had markedly improved their child's engagement in learning:

““ It's done wonders for him, he loves it ... it boosted his confidence, he went from someone at the beginning of the year who was crying because he didn't want to go to school, because he felt like he was in the dumb class and he felt that he was behind everyone ... to now, I haven't had tears from him in 6 months. He's happy to go to school, he got an award last night for his dedication to his education.””

[Parent/carer]

Students who responded to the survey generally had a positive or neutral view of tutoring's impact on the way they felt about school. Among 3,300 primary school students, half (52%) said tutoring made them like school more, while 28% said there was no change and 3% said it made them like school less. Among 1,473 secondary school students, 46% said tutoring had helped them be more engaged at school more, while 37% said there was no change and 2% said it made them less engaged at school. Some students responded with 'I don't know': 17% of primary school students and 15% of secondary school students.

Key perceived benefits of small group tuition

Schools reported a range of benefits from small group tuition, particularly:

- fewer distractions and more educator attention than in a traditional class
- greater opportunity for educators and students to build rapport
- the potential for fun and interaction with peers
- students felt more comfortable interacting with the educator and asking questions.

Schools were able to fill core skills gaps to complement and improve ongoing classwork. Students liked that the educator had the time and capacity in the smaller group setting to explain concepts in different ways and at a slower pace, and felt the tutors could provide more attention to them than a teacher could in a larger class. This meant students could be grouped on ability and work together towards a common goal, but at an individualised pace. More attention could be applied to each student which allows more specific help to be delivered. Educators have developed positive relationships with students, providing another source of support within the school for students who may be at risk of disengaging. This has had wellbeing benefits for some students.

The small group tuition has fostered peer relationships among students, with students reporting a sense of belonging in tutoring. Students have been able to work with each other in small groups and in some schools have taken this cooperation back to the classroom by, for example, helping classroom peers with work.

Many schools found that gamification in delivery promoted student engagement. There was more potential for fun and friendly competitive interaction with peers given the small group setting and game-based learning, particularly if compatible students were placed together.

Sessions were often interactive and invited greater 2-way dialogue between students and educators. In the small groups, educators more readily noticed if a student did not understand a concept, and students felt more comfortable to ask questions.

Coordinators and educators reported that student progress could be tracked effectively in small group tuition, and students could better recognise their own development, resulting in some students taking greater ownership of their goal setting and learning.

The duration of tuition sessions and methods for delivery could be adjusted to maximise student engagement. The program has helped teach schools and educators how to harness behaviour at a point of strength and has improved skills in targeted teaching.

Perceived impact on particular cohorts and contexts

The program was implemented in a variety of school contexts and with a variety of student groups. Differences in perceptions of the program's effects in these contexts are explored here.

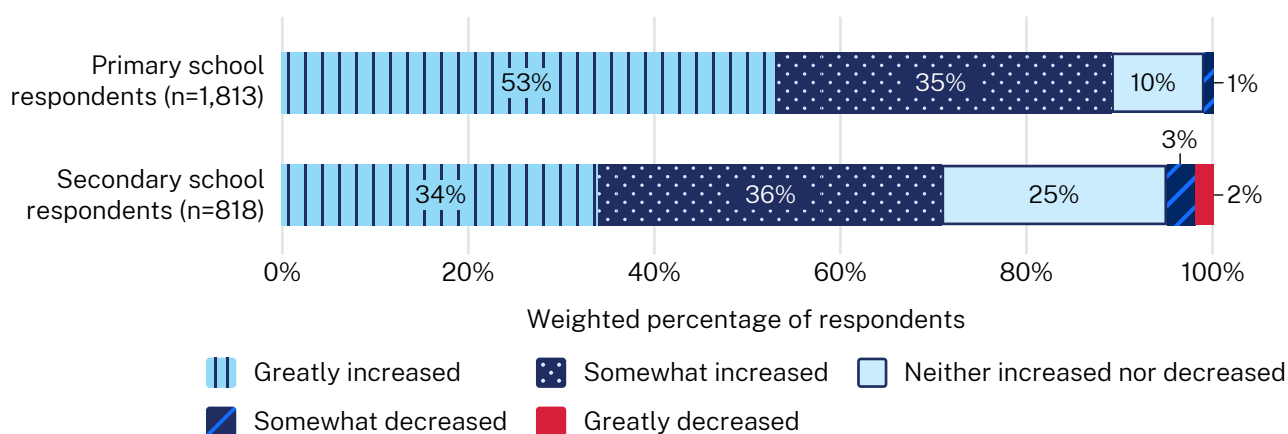
Staff in primary schools rated the program's impact more highly than staff in secondary schools

Staff in primary schools were more likely than staff in secondary schools to report that the program increased the learning progress of students (Figure 11) and that the program improved student confidence, engagement, motivation, attitude towards school, and peer relationships (Figure 12).

Figure 11

Perceived impact of the program on students' learning progress, by primary and secondary school educators and classroom teachers

(n=2,631 educators and teachers)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: 'What impact has the COVID ILSP had on the learning progress of students?'

Note: Due to rounding, the sum of the categories may not add up to 100%.

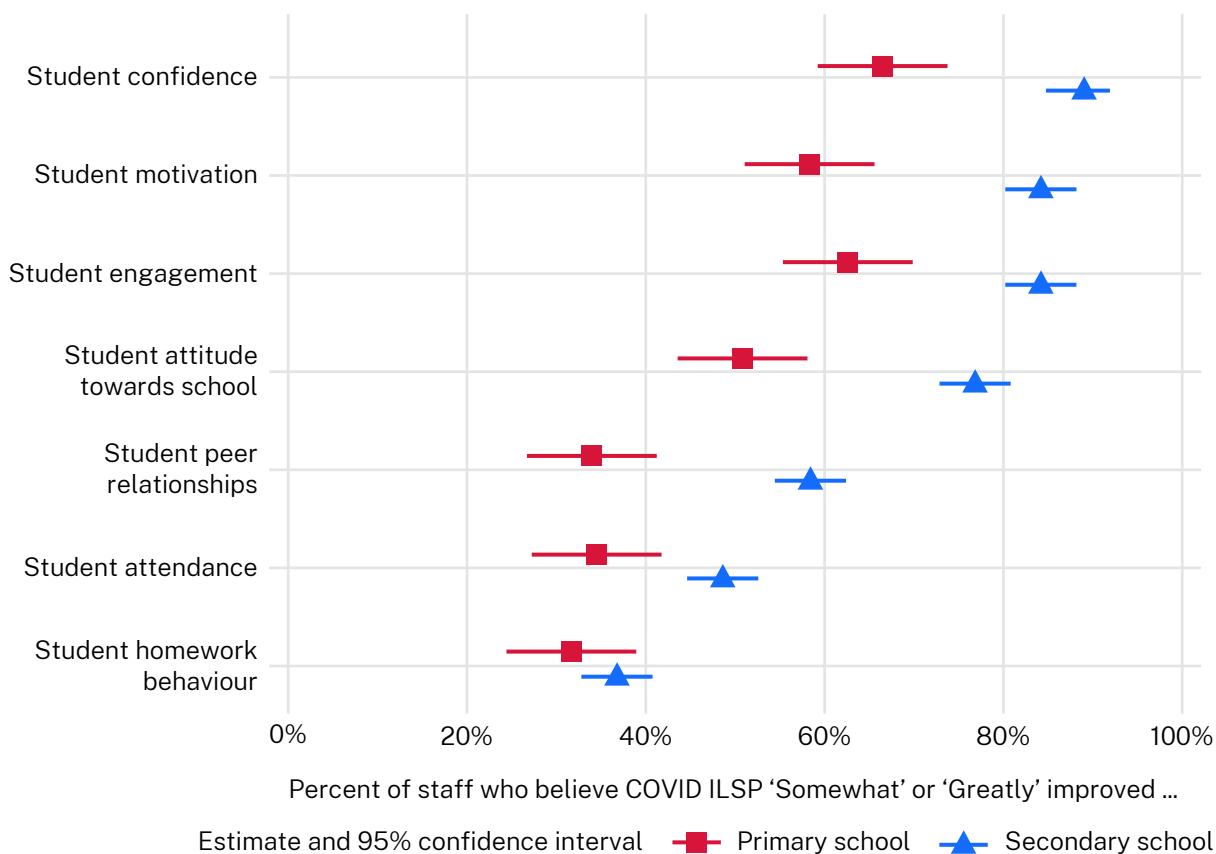
In interviews and focus groups, staff said that the program and the small group tuition approach benefited a broad range of students. There were some differences between primary schools and secondary schools. Educators in primary schools said that students’ motivation had improved, with students keen to show and expand their skills, and taking more ownership of their learning and areas of focus.

Most of the educators and teachers interviewed in secondary schools felt the program had improved students’ attendance, peer relationships (with a greater sense of belonging, and helping one another in tutoring and in class), behaviour, and confidence in asking questions and attempting to solve harder questions.

Figure 12

Perceived impact of the program on students, by primary and secondary school educators and classroom teachers

(n=1,813 primary school educators and teachers and 818 secondary school educators and teachers)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘What impact has the COVID ILSP had on ... ?’.

There were relatively small numbers of survey respondents from schools for specific purposes (n=73), central/community schools (n=63), and Connected Communities schools (n=44). Due to these small sample sizes, there was a large degree of uncertainty about perceived impact, meaning there are no meaningful differences to discuss. Results are in Appendix 7 of the Technical report.

Across school types, there were better perceived outcomes for younger year groups

Staff in interviews and focus groups (across all roles) consistently mentioned differences in the impact of the program by year levels. Staff at both primary and secondary schools felt their younger students had better outcomes from the program. Staff felt this was largely because:

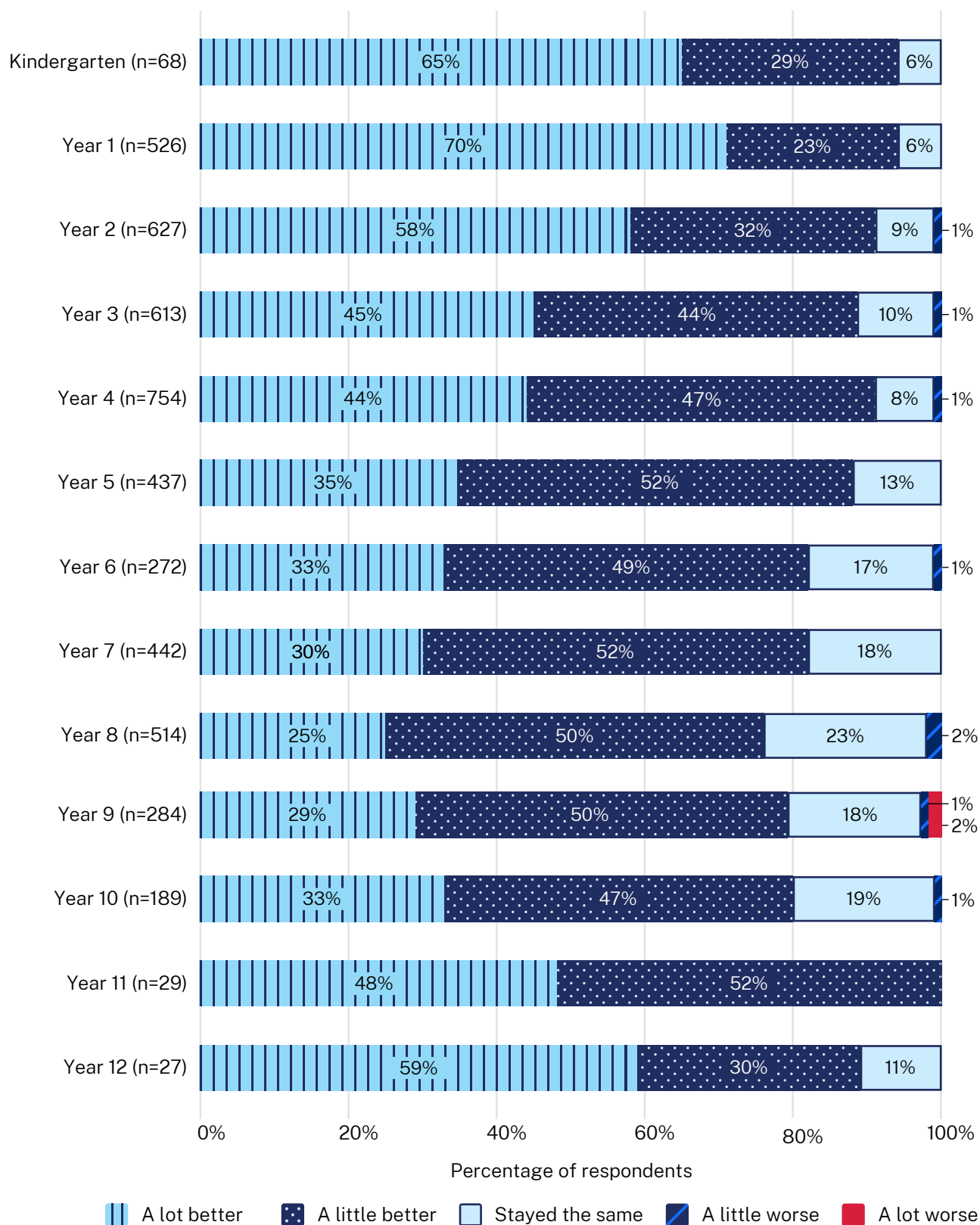
- any knowledge gaps were easier to address earlier on
- younger students in both primary and secondary schools were more willing to learn and easier to engage in tutoring
- older students were more likely to perceive stigma from being involved in the tutoring, particularly if they were withdrawn from class.

The staff view was somewhat consistent with findings from the student survey (Figure 13). The proportion of students rating their learning as 'a lot better' because of the tutoring sessions was highest in younger primary students. The proportion decreased from Year 1 (70%) to Year 6 (33%). However, a limitation of these results is that students in earlier years are more likely to have received help to complete the survey from their educator, resulting in possible agreement bias.

For secondary school students, results were fairly consistent across students in Years 7 to 10. Students in Years 11 and 12 were more positive, but there were comparatively few respondents in those years.

Figure 13

Student views of the impact of the program, by year level (n=4,782)



Source: COVID ILSP student survey 2022. Survey question: 'How have the tutoring sessions changed your learning at school?'

Note: Due to rounding, the sum of the categories may not add up to 100%.

Students with additional support needs: mixed views on impact

There were mixed views on the effectiveness of the program for students with diagnosed or undiagnosed disability or learning difficulties. However, there was consensus in interviews and focus groups that the small group tuition successfully helped schools to identify students who have additional learning and/or behavioural needs that had not previously been recognised, prompting schools to take follow-up action.

Strengths and successes

Both staff and students reported that the program was helpful. Many of the successes of the program relate to the flexibility of the program, and the strength of staff support and collaboration.

Staff highly valued the program

Overall, staff who responded to surveys or participated in interviews and focus groups strongly endorsed the program.

““ This program has been seen at my setting to have the biggest impact on all programs I have seen in my 20 years with DoE ... and 15 years as principal in 2 schools. The program is thorough, was resourced and supported. It has been seamless in terms of information and resources and we feel very supported through the program even as a specialist setting. The resources have made an enormous difference to our teaching staff across the school and it has supported our focus on literacy and numeracy and progressions. The increase in teaching into practice across the school is evidenced. I highly commend the staff who have worked to develop and implement the program – in a time that has been very challenging this program is a silver lining.””

[Principal, School for specific purposes (survey respondent)]

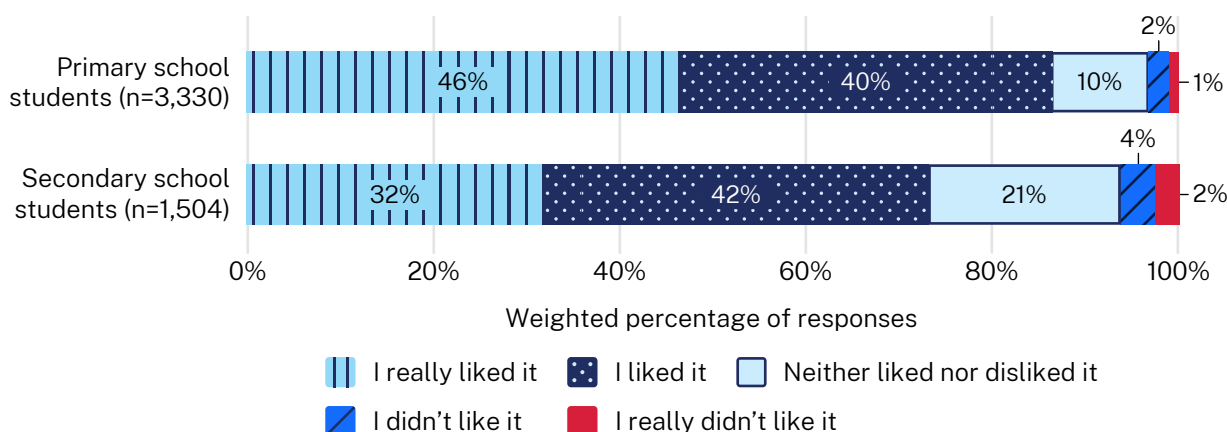
““ We are a school that has been really afforded lots of opportunities in the past through heavy funding from the department ... but I don't think anything has had the impact or the integration into the school as this program has.””

[School leader]

Most student participants enjoyed the tutoring sessions

Most students who responded to the student survey ‘liked’ or ‘really liked’ the tutoring sessions (Figure 14). Primary school students had more positive feelings (86% positive responses) than secondary school students (74% positive responses).

Figure 14
Students’ feelings about the tutoring sessions



Source: COVID ILSP student survey 2022. Survey question: ‘How did you feel about the tutoring sessions?’.
Note: Due to rounding, the sum of the categories may not add up to 100%.

Most students in the focus groups reinforced this view. They valued their tutor’s ability to build rapport, explain concepts to them so they could better understand, and make learning fun, for example by using games. Many students felt they could focus better in a smaller group, and felt more comfortable asking questions than they did in class. Good relationships with other students in the group added to their enjoyment (and vice versa).

For students’ perceptions of the impacts of the program, refer to the section ‘Perceived impact on student learning and engagement’ (page 46).

Evaluation question 3: What challenges were encountered by schools, staff and students?

In 2022 schools faced challenges in recruiting staff to deliver the program and having to redeploy teachers who had been employed as educators to cover absences among classroom teachers. Schools reported that employing non-accredited teachers, such as SLSOs, to deliver the program helped easing staffing constraints.

Schools also faced significant logistical challenges in implementing an extensive program in rapidly changing circumstances. Staff shortages early in 2022 and frequent redeployment of educators meant that implementation did not settle into a smooth and stable operation until Terms 3 and 4 of 2022.

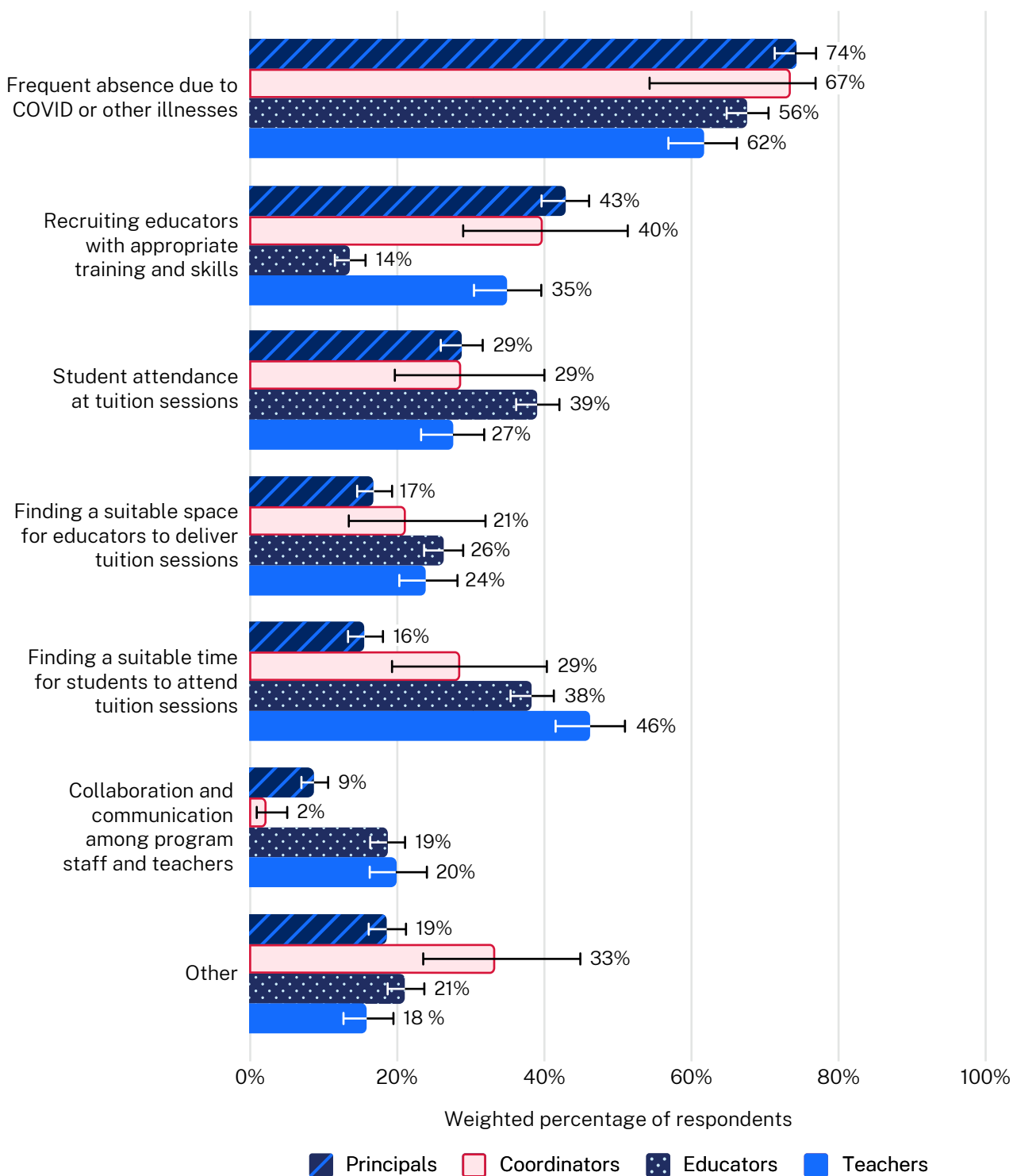
For educators and students, the main challenge in 2022 was the withdrawal of students from class to deliver tuition.

According to staff survey respondents, the most significant challenges in delivering the program in 2022 were frequent staff absences, recruiting educators, and student attendance at tuition sessions (Figure 15). Classroom teachers also reported finding a suitable time for students to attend tuition sessions as a significant challenge, perhaps reflecting their concern about students being withdrawn from class. Staff in interviews and focus groups described similar challenges.

Figure 15

Most significant challenges in delivering the program in 2022, by role

(n=2,533)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘What have been the most significant challenges in delivering the COVID ILSP during 2022? (choose up to 3)’. Error bars show 95% confidence intervals.

Staffing

Workforce issues were the greatest challenge in implementing the program

There were staffing challenges for the program including difficulties recruiting appropriate staff as ILSP educators and having to redeploy ILSP educators to classroom teaching when other teachers were absent.

A principal of a rural primary school commented:

““ The teacher employed to deliver the COVID ILSP has been pulled off the COVID program countless times, sometimes for weeks or months at a time, to cover classes throughout the year as there has been no casual teachers available. This has significantly impacted the success of what has otherwise been an excellent program.””

[Principal and ILSP coordinator, rural primary school]

Schools reported that using SLSOs and pre-service teachers as ILSP educators made recruitment easier and provided more consistency because these staff could not be redeployed to classroom teaching. Nonetheless, obtaining adequate staffing for the program remained a significant issue.

The challenges had several impacts on the program:

- sessions were cancelled, reducing the frequency of program delivery – an important enabler of student success
- schools could not spend all their funding
- there was work overload for staff who took on additional work to compensate for shortages and absences.

Schools were conscientious in their attempts to protect the program from external disruptions. This involved both trying to avoid redeploying staff, or ensuring someone was available to supervise tuition. However, postponing or cancelling tuition sessions was sometimes unavoidable.

Time to consolidate implementation

Implementation was hampered by significant external changes until mid-2022

The program aimed to reach a substantial number of students. Logistical challenges included:

- organising staff to deliver the program
- finding space to conduct tuition sessions
- determining the best structure for the program (for example, frequency and length of sessions) within each school's operating rhythm
- developing learning materials for the program.

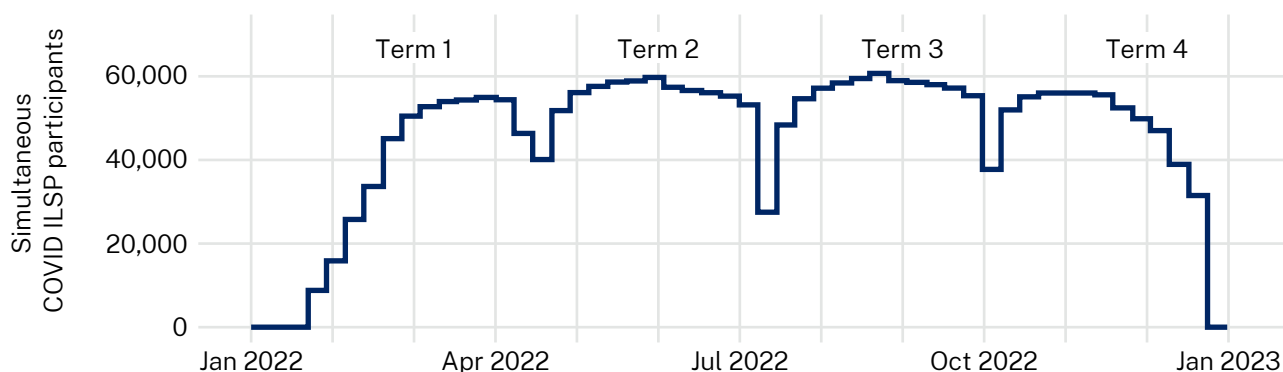
Schools said that it took some time to develop a model or a mix of models that best suited their context. Embedding any new program takes time, but in the case of the COVID ILSP, challenges were compounded by ongoing external changes, including lockdowns, public health restrictions, staff absences, staff shortages, and for some schools, natural disasters. Consequently, some schools needed to repeatedly adapt their delivery model: ‘We were building the plane as we were flying it’.

Although program funding had been in place since early 2021, some schools felt they only hit their stride in mid-2022. While acknowledging that individual students had progressed in their learning, schools felt that significant measurable improvements in academic outcomes may not yet have occurred.

Analysis of tuition group activity over the school year (Figure 16) shows that program activity increased slowly through Term 1 and did not reach full delivery until Terms 2 and 3. The peak of program activity was in Term 3, with 60,496 students in tuition.

Figure 16

Reported program activity over the 2022 school year



Source: PLAN2 full-year participation records, 2022.

Note: while tuition is depicted as having continued through the school holidays, in most cases this is due to low granularity in the reporting platform. For example, a tuition group that was delivered across Term 2 and Term 3 will have been recorded in the platform as also having been delivered in the school holidays between those terms. As some groups were genuinely delivered during the school holidays, we have not excluded the holidays from the analysis.

Student factors

Students missing classes due to tuition was challenging, but schools tried to mitigate impact

A key challenge with the withdrawal model is that students miss class content during tuition sessions. Some students, as well as their teachers, were concerned about missing their usual classes, which could subsequently affect their assessments.

“ I feel like I fell behind in class because of tutoring.”

[Student]

Most schools implemented a model of withdrawing students from their usual classes for tuition. Students were often covering work that differed from class content, and this was intensified in secondary schools where class content is not directly aligned with literacy or numeracy. Secondary school students were often withdrawn from elective classes to receive small group tuition. Some teachers were frustrated about student withdrawal, as teachers then needed to help students catch up. This could also create difficulties in reaching requisite hours of class time for particular subjects. Students expressed concerns about missing class content and the negative impact of this on their assessments.

Schools used several strategies to mitigate the impact of students missing classes:

- timetabling: schools could ensure some classes were not being impacted disproportionately, to benefit both classroom teachers and students to avoid missing significant amounts of class content from one subject.
- proactive engagement: educators could reach out to classroom teachers to ensure they were aware students were being taken out of their class. Conversations between educators and teachers also allowed discussion of student progress and growth.

Schools managed the program to avoid or reduce possible student stigma

In interviews and focus groups several schools reported that students feeling stigma from participating in the program was a challenge during the early implementation, although most primary schools felt there was no stigma attached to participating students.

Schools found that the best cure for possible stigma was student involvement in the program. Despite a few exceptions, overwhelmingly schools reported that once students could see and feel the support the program offered, stigma subsided and student excitement and eagerness to participate in the program grew.

Stigma was less of an issue in schools when:

- a broader cross-section of student abilities participated in the program
- effective communication was provided to students, parents and carers reinforcing the purpose of the program in supporting students to overcome the learning disruptions all students experienced during learning from home.

Secondary schools used several approaches to reduce possible stigma, including:

- reframing and renaming the program to focus on growth rather than deficits – for example, using ‘groups’ rather than ‘tutoring’
- using the tuition space for other learning and support activities too
- using game-based learning to make the sessions fun
- allowing older students to leave the class themselves to go to tuition sessions, rather than being picked up from class by the educator
- when delivering in-class support, allowing educators to meet the needs of a greater number of students, not just students nominated for the program.

However, some stigma remains at a few primary and secondary schools, particularly among older students who did not like the ‘light shone on them’ if they were withdrawn from class.

Evaluation question 4: What teaching and learning resources were incorporated into practice and how helpful were they?

In 2022, the most used resources were the COVID ILSP professional learning modules, the program's staff-facing website and the Microsoft Teams space. There were some differences in most used resources between principals, coordinators and educators. Principals and educators rated the resources as more helpful than coordinators did.

The perceived benefits of the program for schools in terms of improved skills and capabilities among staff were evaluated. Educators said their leadership skills had improved and principals said the program has a positive impact on leadership capability in their school. Staff of all types reported that they had improved their skills and capabilities in the use of data, evidence-based best practice in literacy, and knowledge of best practice for small group tuition.

Use of training and support resources

The most used resources were the COVID ILSP professional learning modules, website and Microsoft Teams

Live and recorded professional learning modules, the COVID ILSP staff-facing website and the program's Microsoft Teams space were the resources used by the most staff (Figure 18). There were some differences by role. The ILSP website was the most used resource by principals (67% of principals), while the professional learning modules were the resource most used by coordinators and educators (65% of coordinators and 54% of educators).

Departmental resources and the departmental COVID ILSP team received positive feedback in comments from staff survey respondents:

“ The COVID ILSP support team, associated resources and website has ensured that this program has been a collaborative effort, clearly supported at all levels.”

[ILSP educator, metropolitan secondary school]

“ We have appreciated the resources provided to us on the Teams platform. It has made us feel part of something bigger.”

[ILSP educator and coordinator, regional secondary school]

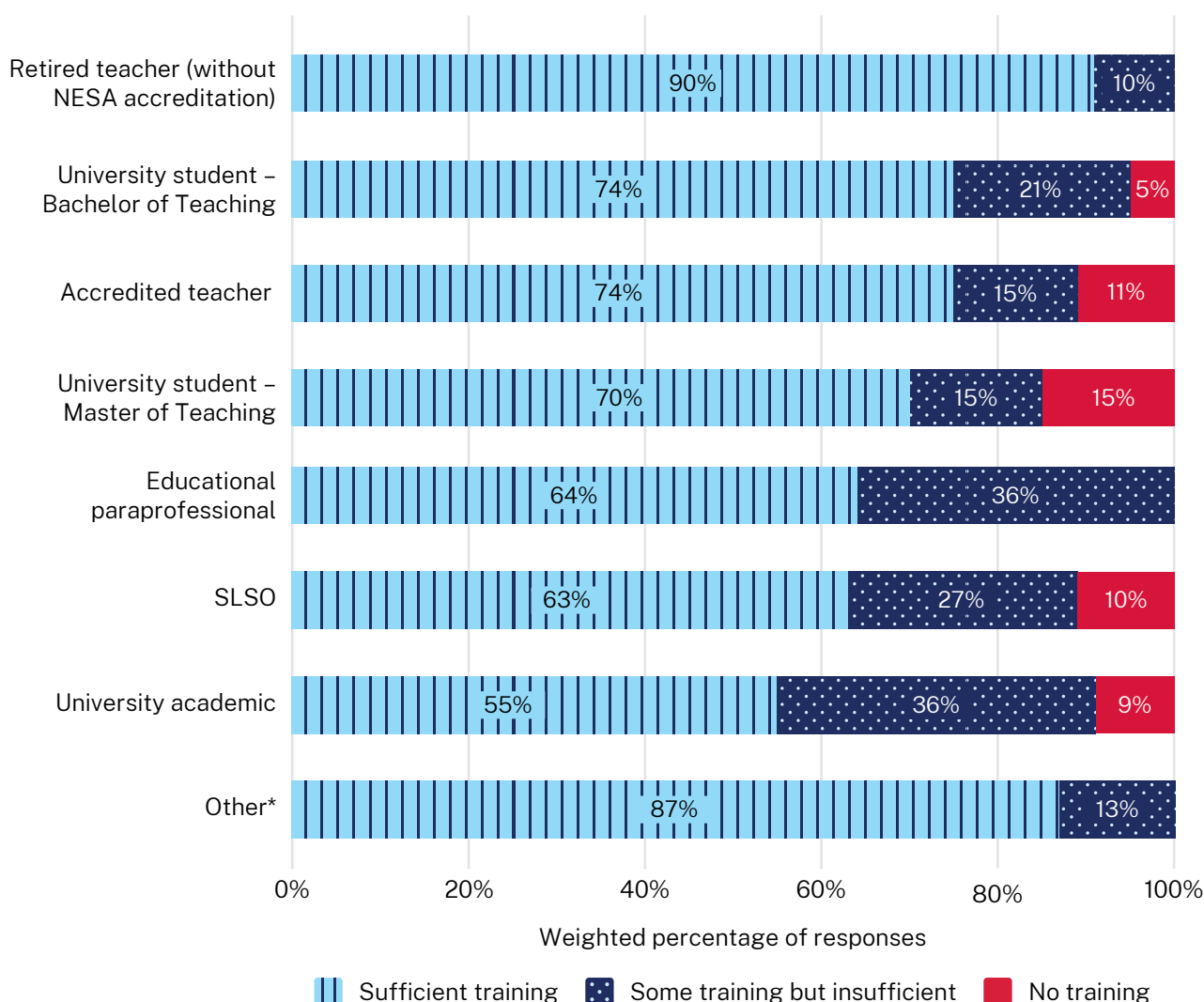
Most educators felt sufficiently prepared to deliver small group tuition

Most educators (73%) said they had sufficient training to start teaching small group tuition, while 17% said they had some training but not sufficient training, and 10% said they had no training. Responses varied between educators with different qualifications (Figure 17). Retired teachers, accredited teachers and university students studying a Bachelor of Teaching were more likely to say they had sufficient training, while university academics, SLSOs and educational paraprofessionals were less likely to say so.

Figure 17

Educators' self-assessment of whether they had sufficient training to deliver small group tuition, by type of qualification

(n=1,086 educators, including educator/coordinators)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘Did you feel sufficiently trained / prepared to start teaching small group tuition?’.

F statistic: 2.09, p=0.01 indicates that staff with different qualifications responded to the question in significantly different proportions.

* ‘Other’ responses included other university student or graduate, retired accredited teacher, and teacher with provisional accreditation.

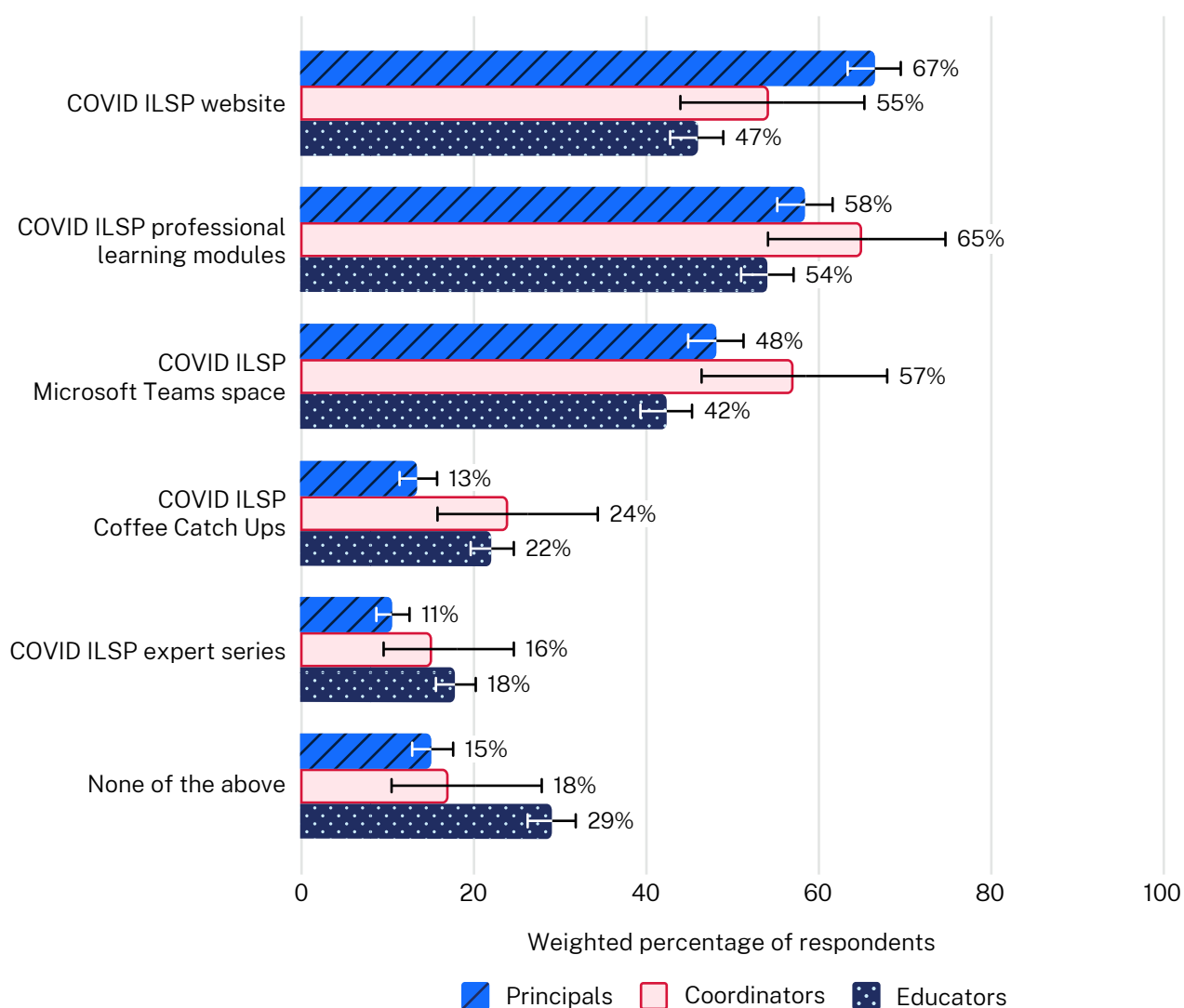
Resources may be underused by educators

There is an opportunity to improve access to teaching and learning resources among program educators. Just over half (54%) had used the professional learning modules, fewer than half (42%) had used the Teams space, and 29% had not used any of the centralised ILSP teaching and learning resources (Figure 18). The staff interviews and focus groups suggested that barriers to access include time constraints and difficulty in navigating the Teams space.

Figure 18

Use of COVID ILSP teaching and learning resources, by role

(n=2,177 principals, coordinators and educators)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘Have you used any of the following resources? (select all that apply)’.

Helpfulness of resources

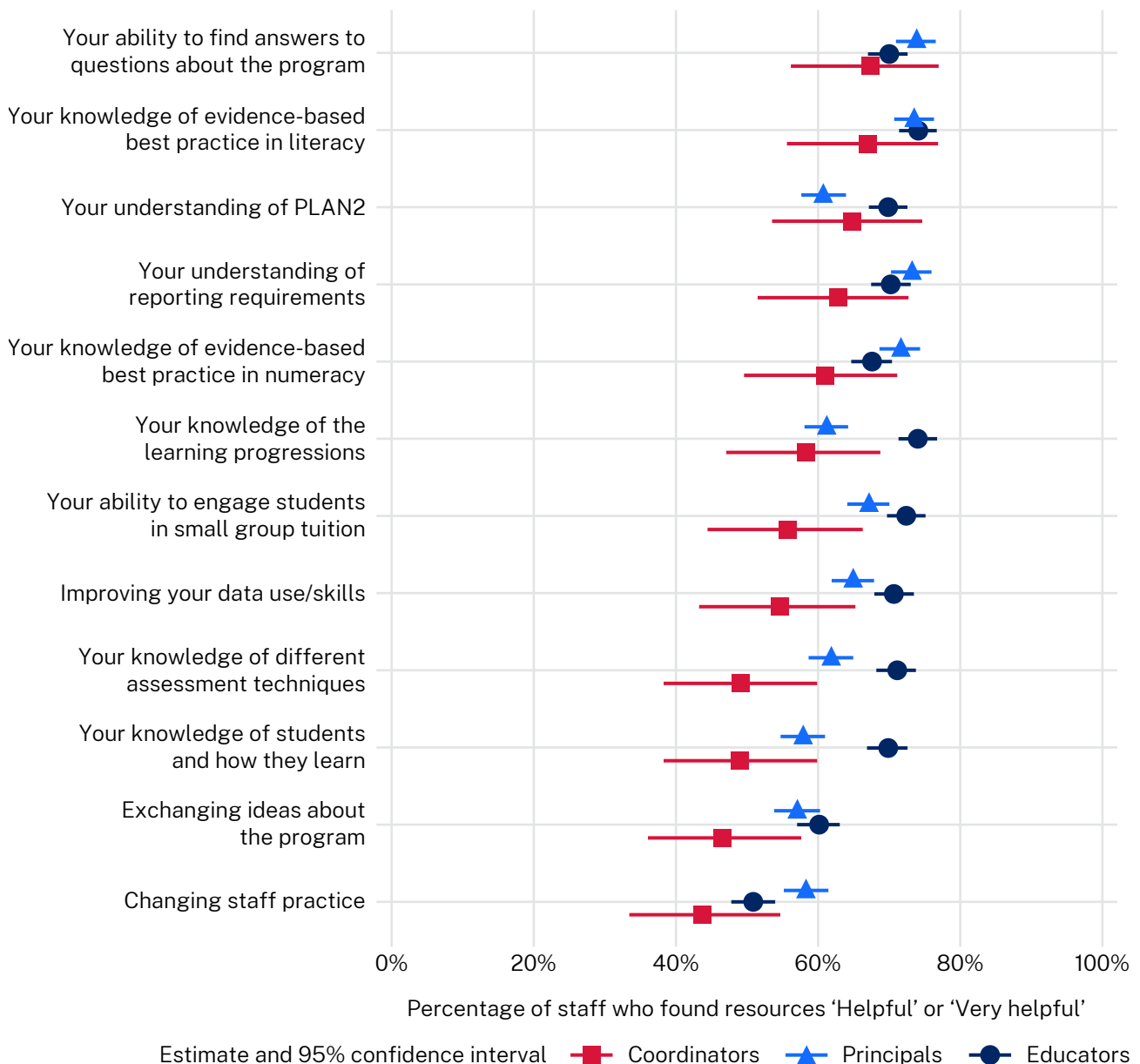
Staff found the resources helpful for different purposes

Responses on the helpfulness of the COVID ILSP teaching and learning resources for various purposes varied by role, which likely reflects different information needs (Figure 19). Overall, principals and educators rated the resources as more helpful than coordinators did. Most principals and educators said the resources were ‘very helpful’ or ‘somewhat helpful’ for all purposes. Coordinators’ information and problem-solving needs are perhaps more complex than those of principals and educators, which may explain this difference.

Figure 19

Helpfulness of COVID ILSP resources, by role

(n=967 principals; 693 coordinators; 1,027 educators)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: ‘How helpful have the COVID ILSP resources been for ...?’.

Staff valued the Teams space, but some staff were overwhelmed by the volume of resources and navigation

The Microsoft Teams space had been used by 57% of coordinators, 48% of principals and 42% of educators (Figure 18). During the staff interviews and focus groups, staff tended to speak about the Teams space when they were referring generally to departmental ILSP resources. More than half of the schools in the interviews and focus groups offered positive feedback about the Teams space, with comments primarily focused on the resources found there. PLAN2 guidance and the professional learning modules were particularly highlighted as strengths.

However, staff also said that the user interface for the Teams space was difficult to navigate. This feedback was from comments in the staff survey and from staff in schools. Some staff found the volume of information to be overwhelming, and said the interface made it difficult to find information for their needs. One coordinator commented that the system ‘fed through more than was required’; another coordinator deleted the Teams space from their school’s system until they realised it was the main source of communication about COVID ILSP resources and guidelines. The time taken to sift through the Teams interface was cited as a problem by these schools:

““ There is a wealth of information on the COVID ILSP Teams. So much so, that it is overwhelming and often counterproductive.””

[ILSP educator and coordinator, regional primary school (survey respondent)]

““ [Educators] spend a lot of time in the classroom, with the teachers, which means we’re not at a desk for 7 hours a day where you have the luxury of filtering, looking for things.””

[ILSP coordinator]

One interviewee stressed that Teams should not be the only form of communication, and should be supplemented by direct contact because it could be time-consuming when questions were misunderstood.

““ You ask a question [using Teams], but you don’t actually get an answer to the question. And then you have to go back and say, well, that’s not what I actually asked, this was my question. And you’ll try that 2 or 3 times. And if you don’t get a response that’s gonna answer your question, you just don’t ask again.””

[ILSP coordinator]

Some interviewed staff, such as those at schools for specific purposes, found the Teams space and available resources unhelpful for their needs, typically because they felt the resources were not aimed at them.

Staff found the professional learning modules were clear and well-structured, but finding time to complete modules was difficult

Between program initiation in 2021 and the end of 2022, the COVID ILSP school support team published 74 professional learning modules. Topics included program setup and administration (including the use of PLAN2 and financial reporting systems), pedagogy for literacy and numeracy small group tuition, and strategies for delivering small group tuition in particular contexts.

The COVID ILSP professional learning modules had been used by 65% of coordinators, 58% of principals and 54% of educators (Figure 18).

Staff in interviews and focus groups spoke positively about the modules. One school highlighted the explicitness of the literacy and numeracy resources as a strength, as these resources could be used by SLSOs to improve their skills in delivering small group tuition. One school noted that the recordings of the mini sessions were a great aid, as they could revisit and share them further. This was supported in survey comments:

““ The [professional learning] was excellent and having recorded PL assisted greatly to watch when time allowed.””

[Classroom teacher, regional primary school]

Some staff said that finding time to do the professional learning modules was difficult. With teaching schedules already tight, staff did not always have the time to complete the modules, although these staff did qualify their statements by saying that from what they saw, the professional learning modules looked useful.

““ I wish that I could have used the PL sessions to learn more about small group tuition. With being an RFF [relief from face-to-face]/mentoring teacher I was doing up to 17 programs and time for that learning was not possible.””

[ILSP educator, rural primary school (survey respondent)]

Module viewership data reveals that the most used of the recorded modules were:

- ‘PLAN2’, a module demonstrating data entry requirements, with 2,132 distinct viewers over the evaluation period, and on average 43 views per week over the 101 weeks that it was available
- ‘Best practice in small group tuition’, with 1,582 distinct viewers and on average 30 views per week for the 104 weeks it was available
- ‘Assessment practices to support small group tuition’, with 1,454 distinct viewers and on average 28 views per week over the 101 weeks it was available.

Collectively, the 79 recorded modules were viewed over 39,000 times between their publication and the finalisation of the evaluation dataset in February 2023. Many of these modules were also delivered live, to large audiences, prior to being recorded.

Staff were positive about the ILSP website, particularly the structured guidance on how to use resources

The internal, staff-facing COVID ILSP website had been used by 67% of principals, 55% of coordinators and 47% of educators (Figure 18).

Most staff in interviews and focus groups reported a positive experience with the website. One coordinator commented that the resources available were a good base platform for a new educator. Information on how to use PLAN2 was useful. As with other resources, some staff said that finding time to use the website was challenging.

Coffee catch-ups enabled a sense of community and sharing between schools

The COVID ILSP coffee catch-ups were a series of informal before school online meetings run by the COVID ILSP support team. They allowed school staff to ask questions of each other and the program team, and for schools to present their experiences and implementation models to a statewide audience.

The COVID ILSP coffee catch-ups had been used by 24% of coordinators, 22% of educators and 13% of principals (Figure 18).

In interviews and focus groups, the coffee catch-ups were positively received by staff who had used them. The most commonly cited strength of the catch-ups was the sense of community that staff developed by sharing experiences between schools. Two of the schools had delivered presentations in the coffee catch-ups.

MultiLit resources were widely used and had favourable feedback from schools on positive student impacts and staff professional development

About half the schools in the interviews and focus groups reported that they used the MultiLit programs, including MiniLit and MacqLit. Due to the strict parameters of these programs, schools found them easy to implement accurately. One school allowed SLSOs to run the MultiLit programs, as the school sufficiently trusted the framework. Comments in the staff survey also referred to training SLSOs to deliver these programs.

““ The groups have also included MiniLit groups which have also been very effective in meeting the needs of students. SLSO staff have also been trained to implement programs to small groups.””

[Classroom teacher, regional primary school]

““ We could also have impact on more students when we trained SLSOs and teachers in the MiniLit program.””

[Principal and ILSP coordinator, metropolitan primary school]

Staff reported that they used the MultiLit resources to assess student progress and to deliver small group tuition. The assessments helped identify when students were ready to re-enter the main classroom without support, and provided feedback to students so they could see their own successes and build their confidence.

Perceived impact of the program on schools' practices and staff capabilities and learning and support approaches

Some of the program impacts reported by schools related to school practices, improvements to staff capabilities and leadership skills, as well as changes to learning and support approaches.

The program improved staff skills and capabilities

Principals, coordinators and educators reported improvements in staff skills and capabilities, especially skills in use of data, evidence-based best practice in literacy, and knowledge of what works best in small group tuition.

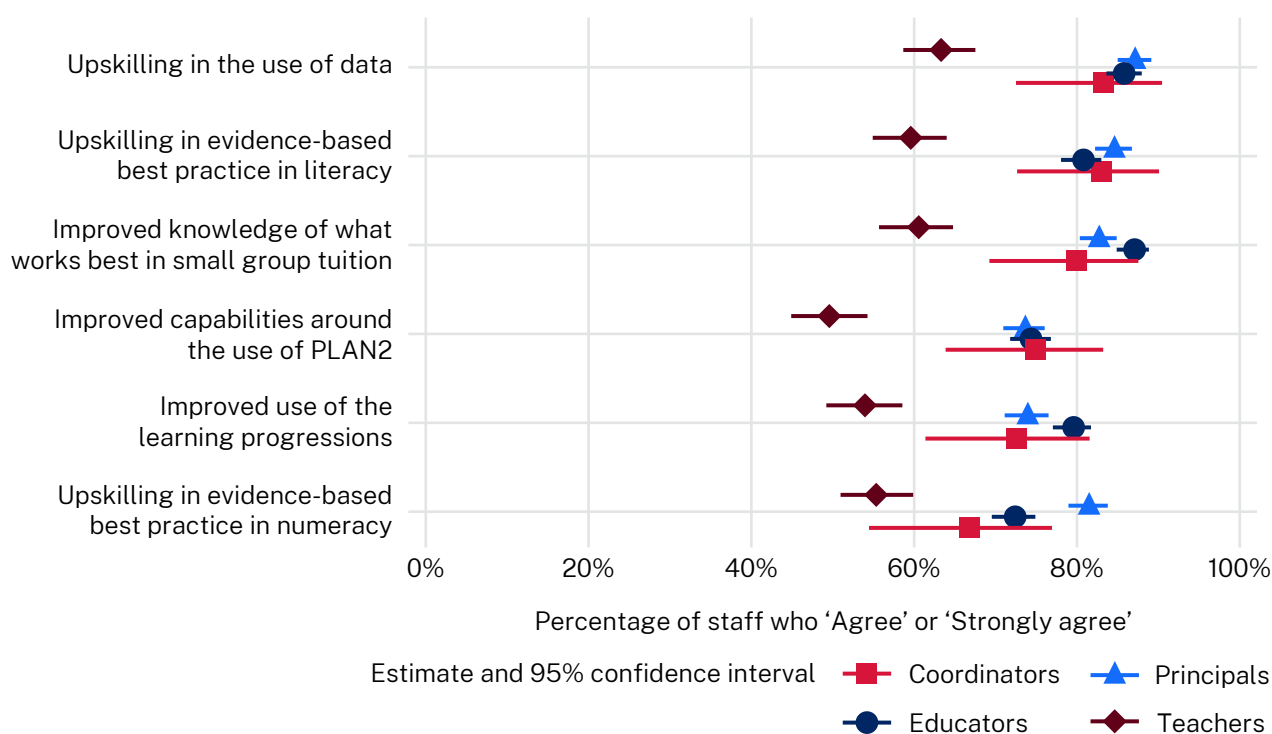
The staff survey asked principals and coordinators about the perceived impacts of the program on skills and capabilities among school staff. Educators and classroom teachers were asked about changes in their own skills and capabilities in these areas.

Staff reported improvements in 3 areas (Figure 20):

- skills in use of data
- evidence-based best practice in literacy
- knowledge of what works best in small group tuition.

Figure 20

Perceived effects of the program on staff skills and capabilities, by role



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Different populations were asked slightly different questions: 'Do you agree with the following statements about the impact of COVID ILSP on staff delivering the program?' (principals, coordinators); 'Do you agree with the following statements about the impact of COVID ILSP on you as a staff member?' (educators, teachers).

Note: Principal and educator categories include principal/coordinators and educator/coordinators.

Slightly lower proportions of staff reported improvements in evidence-based best practice in numeracy, use of PLAN2, and use of the learning progressions. More than 70% of principals, coordinators and educators agreed there had been upskilling in these skills and capabilities. The higher proportion of staff reporting improved proficiency with evidence-based best practice in literacy, compared to numeracy, is likely related to greater emphasis on delivering literacy groups across schools.

A lower proportion of classroom teachers reported improvements in skills and capabilities, compared to other staff categories. This is expected, given their role is only partly focused on the program. However, between 49% and 64% of teachers still reported improvements in specific skills and capabilities (Figure 20). This suggests many school staff have engaged meaningfully with the program, with a likely boost in capability across the NSW government school system.

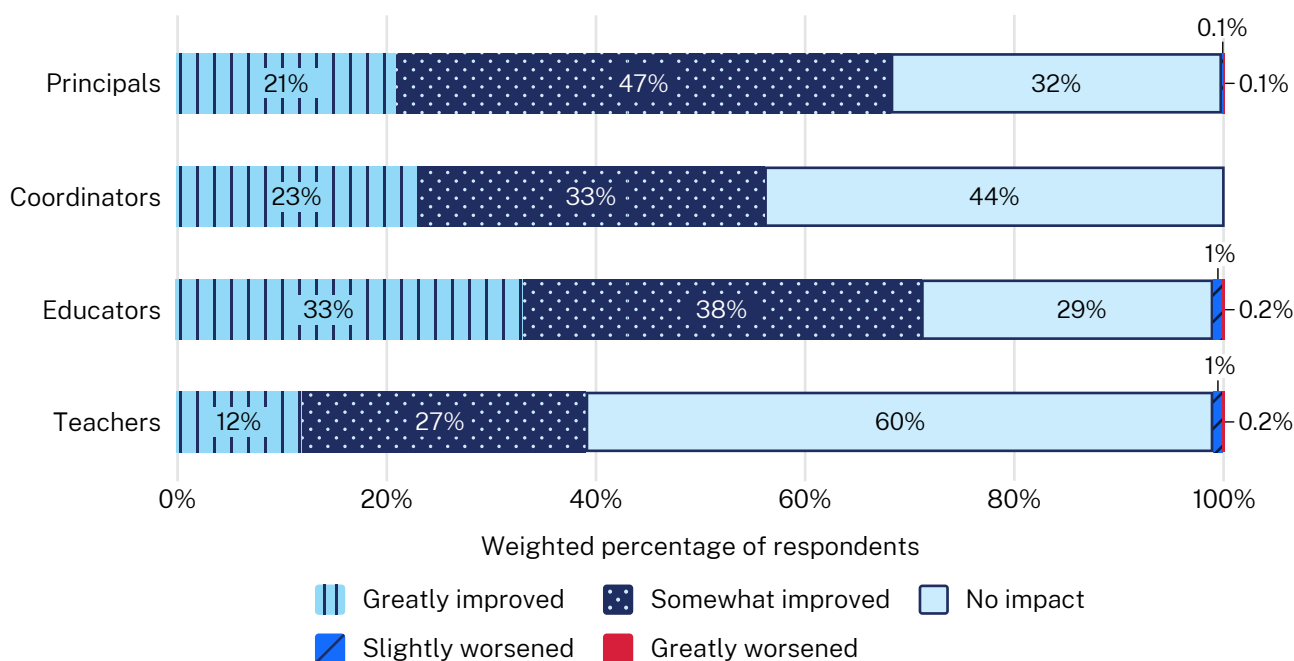
The program developed leadership capability

The staff survey asked principals and coordinators about the perceived impact of the program on leadership capability in their school, and asked educators and classroom teachers about the impact on their own leadership skills. The majority of educators, principals and coordinators indicated that the program has contributed to leadership capability. Educators reported the strongest impact on their own leadership skills (Figure 21). A majority of principals and coordinators felt the program had either ‘greatly improved’ or ‘somewhat improved’ leadership capability in the school.

Figure 21

Perceived impact of the program on leadership capability, by role

(n=980 principals; 691 coordinators; 1,109 educators; 459 teachers)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey questions: ‘What impact, if any, has the COVID ILSP had on leadership capability in the school?’ (principals, coordinators); ‘What impact, if any, has the COVID ILSP had on you regarding your leadership skills?’ (educators, teachers).

Notes: Principal and educator categories include principal/coordinators and educator/coordinators. Due to rounding, the sum of the categories may not add up to 100%.

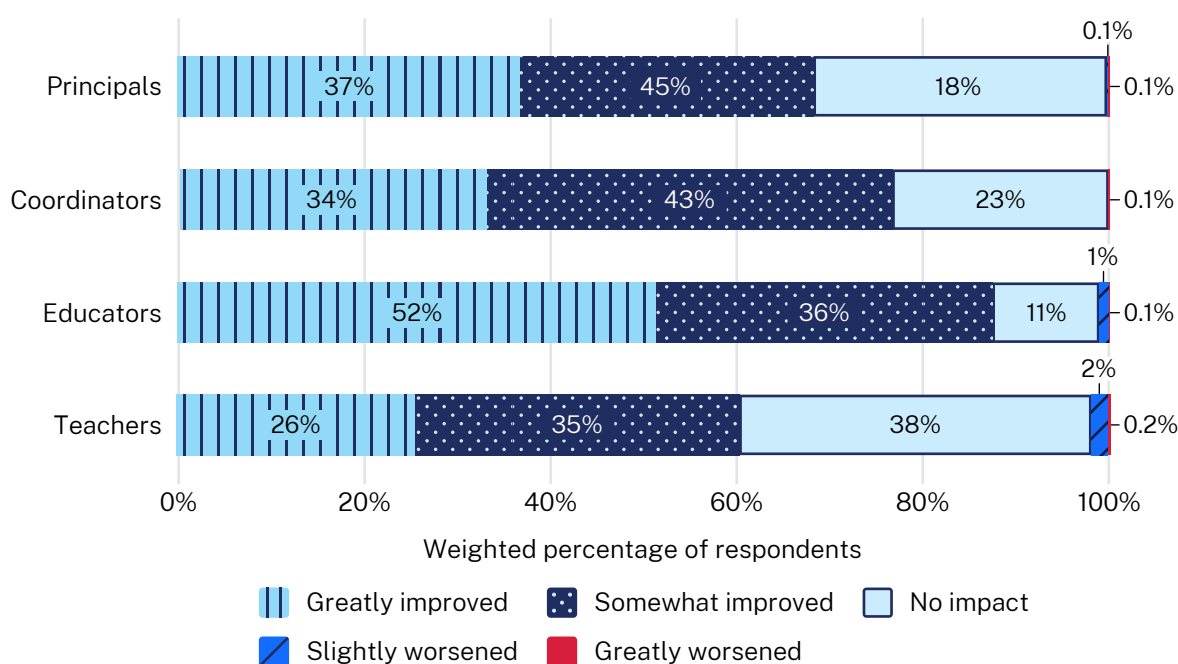
The program improved collaboration among staff in schools

Staff agreed the program had improved collaboration: 82% of principals, 77% of coordinators, 88% of educators and 61% of teachers said the program had either ‘greatly improved’ or ‘somewhat improved’ collaboration among staff (Figure 22). Notably, 52% of educators said collaboration had ‘greatly improved’.

Figure 22

Perceived impact of the program on collaboration among staff, by role

(n=980 principals; 690 coordinators; 1,111 educators; 460 teachers)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey questions: ‘What impact, if any, has the COVID ILSP had on collaboration among staff?’ (principals, coordinators); ‘What impact, if any, has the COVID ILSP had on you regarding your collaboration with other staff?’ (educators, teachers).

Notes: Principal and educator categories include principal/coordinators and educator/coordinators. Due to rounding, the sum of the categories may not add up to 100%.

Staff in interviews and focus groups said that effective communication and collaboration between school leaders, coordinators, educators and classroom teachers was a key enabler to the successful implementation of the program. Coordinators were an important contributor to this communication and collaboration.

Improved collaboration among staff is a notable broader benefit of the program, as it facilitates addressing student needs in a holistic way.

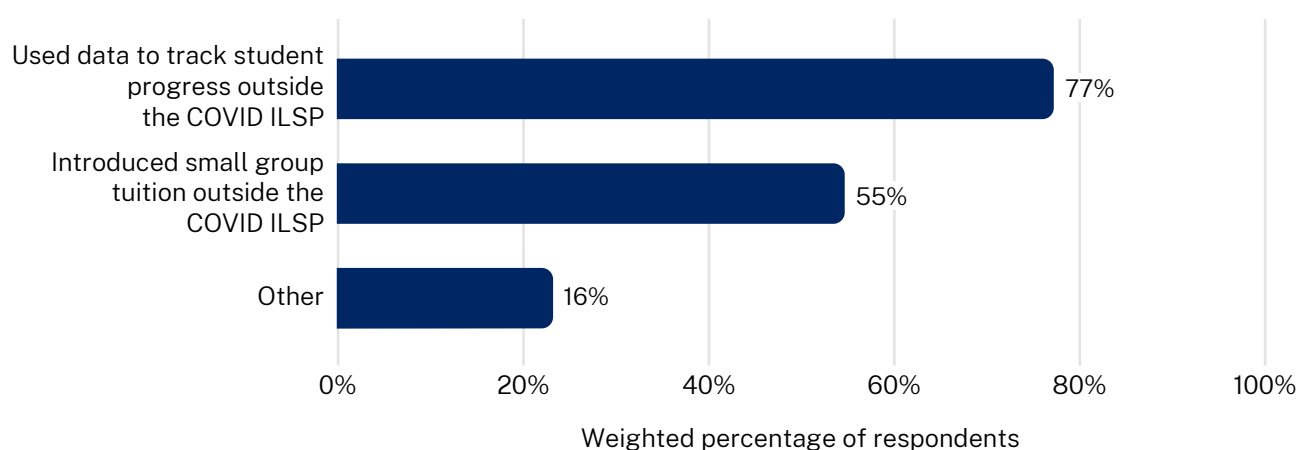
The program has prompted changes to other types of learning and support

The program appears to have had flow-on impacts to other learning and support approaches within schools. In the staff survey, 60% of principals said their school had changed approaches to other types of learning support since the program began. The types of changes are shown in Figure 23. These may be concurrent changes rather than a causal result of the program, but the findings from interviews and focus groups suggest that the program has contributed.

Figure 23

Types of changes to other types of learning support reported by principals

(n=590 principals and principal/coordinators)



Source: COVID ILSP staff survey 2022. Survey question: 'How has your school changed approaches to other types of learning support?'

Other' changes identified by principals in the staff survey included:

- more targeted approaches to learning and support, including using data to identify unmet needs, greater use of PLAN2, more embedded use of departmental resources, and alignment of programs to an evidence-based approach
- greater involvement of the school executive, and restructuring and refining learning and support programs and small group tuition processes across the school
- upskilling SLSOs and classroom teachers in learning and support
- greater use of short learning 'sprints'
- introducing new literacy skills, based on what was being done in the COVID ILSP.

The program appears to have highlighted the benefits of small group tuition, targeted tuition focused on students' needs, and the use of data to identify needs and monitor progress:

“Data tracking has been enhanced. Consistent focus at point of need for identified students with regular feedback to staff has been a game changer and supported by all staff.”

[Principal, regional primary school (survey respondent)]

“ Really honed in on student data to target the right students. We then used short sprints to focus on specific areas.”

[Principal and ILSP coordinator, metropolitan primary school (survey respondent)]

“ Every child is on PLAN2, there is more transparency as every teacher has access to it. We update it every 5 weeks so teachers have this data. It now feels like we’re all heading in the same direction.”

[School leader]

Staff in interviews and focus groups noted that a clear benefit of the COVID ILSP was that it has encouraged more monitoring of student progress. Some schools commented that they now engage with the literacy and numeracy progressions more broadly across the school. Staff said that assessment data has helped schools design programs better suited to students, and educators have improved their ability to design lessons by analysing data to identify learning needs. Improved monitoring helps visualise the progress that students have made, which is satisfying for students.

Schools said that PLAN2 had been a useful resource for monitoring student progress as it is important to have a centralised data source. For some staff, however, learning how to use PLAN2 is ongoing.

In interviews and focus groups, both staff and students indicated they would like to maintain an ongoing small group tuition program beyond COVID ILSP, although school leaders noted they would need continued funding.

Expanded skills and responsibilities among SLSOs and pre-service teachers are likely to benefit the future workforce

As described earlier in the ‘Implementation’ section, SLSOs and pre-service teachers have benefited from the excellent professional development opportunity. This improves future workforce capability. In interviews and focus groups other staff described how their skills have grown:

“ When you observe their [the SLSOs’] lessons, you can see all the work that’s gone into them – that they are actually really good at developing students’ numeracy and literacy and able to use a variety of strategies. So as something which has built up their skills as teachers, it’s been really good.”

[ILSP coordinator]

The experience of pre-service teachers in the program and their development of relationships with schools may ease their transition into the teaching workforce and potentially contribute to future workforce retention.

“ Another thing that I find really, as a pre-service teacher, as being valuable, is getting experience in a school where I can start building relationships and hopefully teach in the future with students who I already know.”

[Pre-service teacher]

Evaluation question 5: Did the program improve the academic outcomes of participating students?

Analysis of the department's Check-in assessments for Years 4 to 9 shows that on average, students in every year level improved their academic outcomes from 2021 to 2022. Generally, student growth was the same between students who participated in the program and similar non-participants.

For most year levels that completed the Check-in assessment, program participants improved their academic results the same amount as similar non-participants. In the Check-in numeracy domain, participants in Year 5 and Year 6 had slightly less improvement than similar non-participants. In all other Check-in year levels for numeracy, and every Check-in year level for reading, participants had the same improvement in Check-in scores as similar non-participants.

Data quality limits the evaluation of the program. Reporting mechanisms improved in 2022 compared to 2021, but limitations prevented the meaningful analysis of possible differences in program impact by variations in implementation such as number of tuition sessions delivered, frequency of tuition, or group sizes.

Program effect on academic growth

The program's effect on academic growth was estimated by comparing the growth in Check-in assessment scores from 2021 (before program participation) to 2022 (after program participation) between 2 groups:

- students who participated in the program
- students who were statistically similar to participants, but were not selected to participate in the program.

The Check-in assessment is a standardised test, developed by the department to track progress against the NSW Syllabuses and the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions. The assessment is performed on 3 domains: reading and numeracy in Years 3 to 9, and writing in Year 6 only. In this evaluation, we estimated the academic growth of program participants who received literacy tuition using changes in their scores in the Check-in assessment reading domain. We assessed the growth of participants who received numeracy tuition using changes in their scores in the numeracy domain. Results in the writing domain were not examined. Only students in year levels 4 to 9 in 2022 were included in the evaluation, as these are the students for whom both 2021 and 2022 Check-in results were available.

The COVID ILSP team contacted a random sample of 282 schools during Term 4 2022 to help improve the quality and completeness of the data those schools had captured about their participants. We analysed the academic growth of participants and non-participants at only those 282 schools. Details of the sampling, matching and outcome modelling process are in the Technical report.

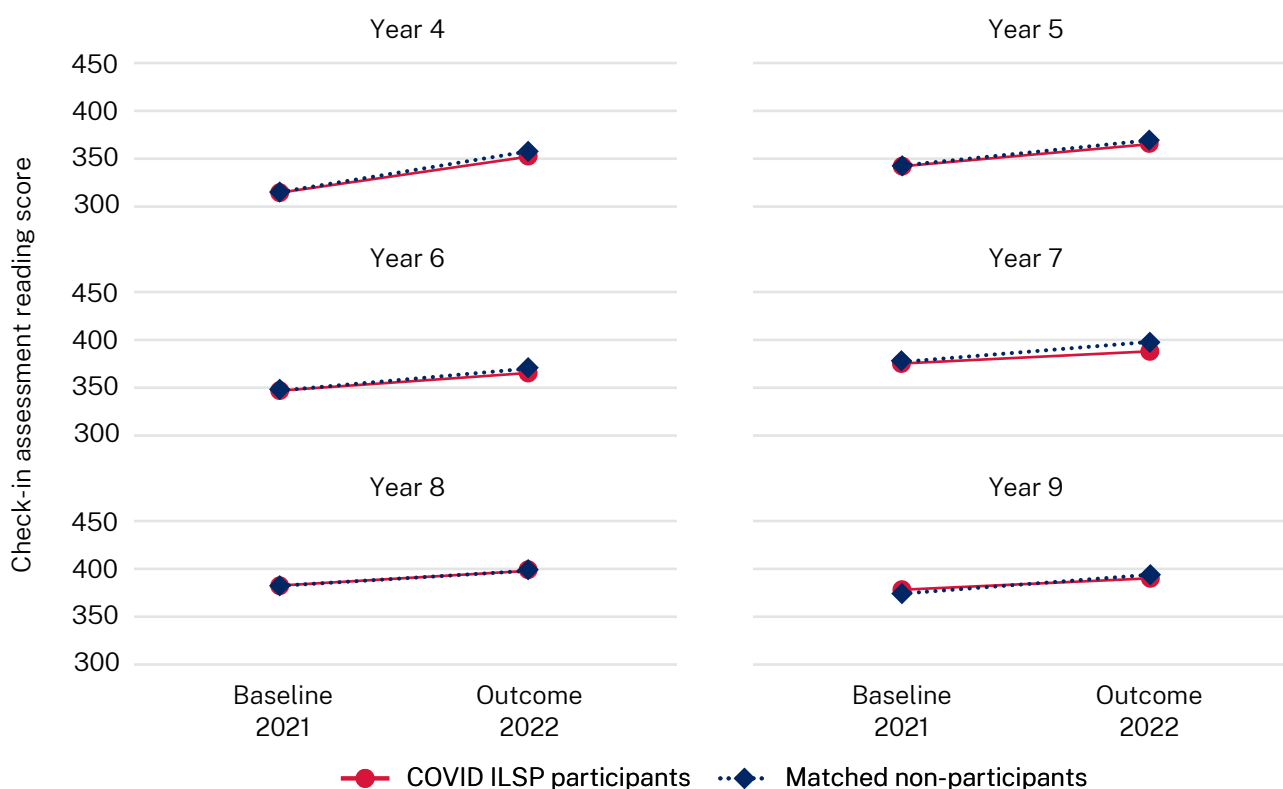
We matched each participant to a similar non-participating student within the sample of schools. Students were matched on academic, demographic and school characteristics. We compared the change in Check-in scores from 2021 to 2022 between participants and the group of matched, similar non-participants. Through statistical modelling, this comparison accounted for differences in student demographics and school characteristics between the 2 groups.

Literacy tuition: literacy participants and matched non-participants experienced similar academic growth

The Check-in reading domain scores of literacy participants grew on average by the same amount as similar students who did not participate in the program (Figure 24). We could not detect any statistically significant differences in the rate of improvement between the 2 groups in any of the year levels that completed the Check-in assessment.

Figure 24

Growth in Check-in reading scores among literacy tuition participants and matched non-participants



Source: Marginal model mean estimates from difference-in-difference analyses of 5,061 COVID ILSP participants who received literacy tuition and 5,061 similar non-participants, at a sample of 282 schools.

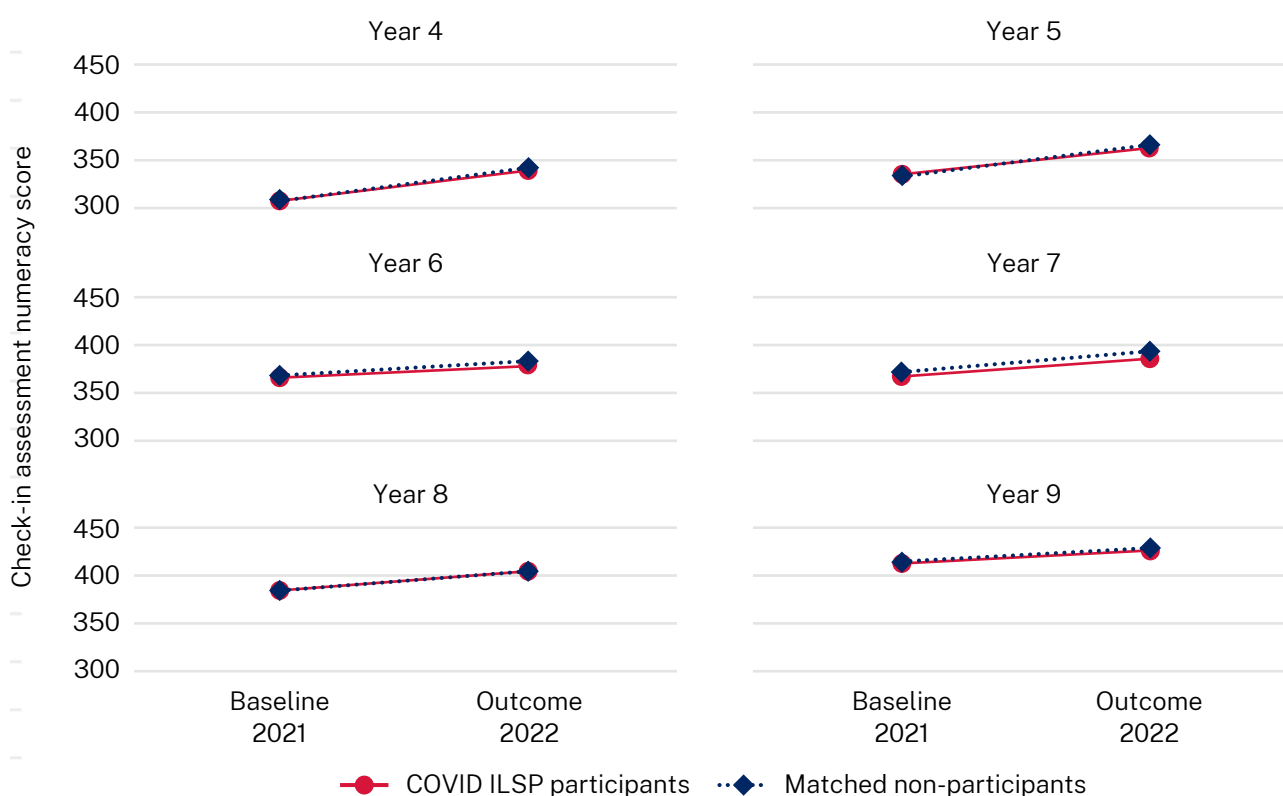
Numeracy tuition: numeracy participants and matched non-participants experienced similar academic growth in most year levels

For most year levels that completed the Check-in assessment, the scores in the numeracy domain of numeracy program participants grew on average by the same amount as similar non-participants (Figure 25).

However, Year 5 and Year 6 program participants had, on average, slightly less improvement than their matched non-participants. Although this difference was statistically significant, it is unlikely that it is large enough to be of practical significance. In standardised effect-size units, the changes in growth for Years 5 and 6 were -0.08 and -0.11 respectively (Figure 26). In most studies of education interventions, an effect size is considered 'small' only if it reaches an absolute value of 0.2 (Hattie 2015).

Figure 25

Growth in Check-in numeracy scores among numeracy tuition participants and matched non-participants



Source: Marginal model mean estimates from difference-in-difference analyses of 4,160 COVID ILSP participants who received numeracy tuition and 4,160 similar non-participants, at a sample of 282 schools.

Academic growth in participants could not be attributed to the program

Because the Check-in scores of participants and non-participants grew at the same rate regardless of whether they received small group tuition, we cannot attribute their academic growth to the effect of the program. In most year levels, participating students achieved statistically similar academic growth over one year when compared to similar non-participating students.

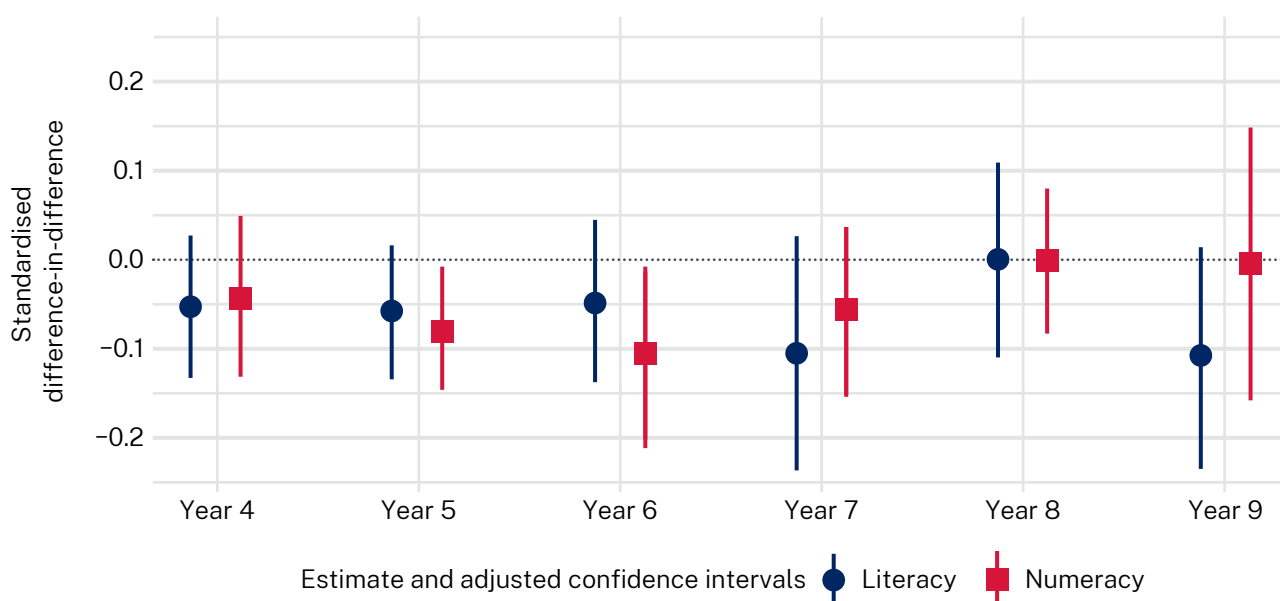
In Figure 26, the circles (for literacy) or squares (for numeracy) indicate estimated academic growth for participants compared to non-participants. The vertical lines indicate the confidence intervals (margin of error) associated with those estimates. Where the vertical confidence interval lines cross the horizontal line of 0, the estimated effect of the program cannot be distinguished from no effect. Only the confidence intervals for the effect of the program in Years 5 and 6 numeracy fall completely below 0. In these 2 year levels, participants still experienced academic growth, but the amount of that growth was slightly less than for similar non-participants.

Results have been standardised to make comparisons between year levels and areas of tuition focus. The unit is the standard deviation of the baseline Check-in scores in 2021. When measuring the effect of education interventions in standard deviation units, an absolute value of 0.2 is often considered the cut off for a small effect. On this scale, the program's effect was minimal, at smaller than -0.2 in all year groups

Figure 26

Program effect on growth in Check-in scores, by year level and area of tuition focus

(n=15,532 students from sample of 282 schools; 7,766 participants and 7,766 matched non-participants)



Source: Difference-in-difference analyses between 2021 and 2022 of Check-in scores of participants and matched non-participating students. Results have been standardised to make comparisons between year levels and areas of tuition focus. 95% confidence intervals were adjusted for multiple comparisons. Confidence intervals (vertical bars) that cross the horizontal line of 0 indicate no statistically significant differences between participants and non-participants.

These findings must be considered in the context of the non-experimental design of this evaluation. The program was not designed to determine the effectiveness of small group tuition, but instead to deliver small group tuition as a response to the COVID-19 disruptions to learning.

Other analytical choices did not change the findings

We completed several alternative analyses to investigate whether the findings were affected by our analytical choices. Alternative methods did not meaningfully change the results. The Technical report has complete details of the other analyses.

Limitations in estimating program effect

The broad Check-in domains may not be sensitive enough to detect the effect of intensive tuition in specific sub-elements

Schools' reporting of a tuition group's specific learning progression focus was optional. Where it was reported, groups often focused on a single sub-element or indicator within the National Literacy and Numeracy Learning Progressions framework. For example, a numeracy tuition group may have focused on a specific indicator in the multiplicative strategies sub-element for the whole of a 10-week tuition cycle, or a literacy group may have focused on an indicator in the word recognition sub-element.

These specific indicators are assessed within the Check-in assessment's numeracy and reading domains, but only alongside all of the other sub-elements in each domain. It is possible that we could not detect the small change to a student's overall score that might be attributable to tuition in a specific sub-element. Without complete reporting by schools of each group's sub-element or indicator focus, we cannot estimate the effect of tuition on those sub-elements and indicators.

Check-in assessment, with its yearly frequency and broad coverage of students, is currently the only viable tool by which to measure the academic impacts of the program. Other assessments are either performed too infrequently or do not cover a large enough proportion of both participants and non-participants.

Check-in assessment was mandatory for program participants in 2021 and 2022. However, despite this mandate, a third of participants were not administered either the baseline (2021) or outcome (2022) Check-in assessments. We could not use these students' results to estimate academic growth, as they were missing at least one end point.

Other pre and post-program assessments may be useful to examine the effect of the program in the future. However, the program does not have a mandate to impose any additional assessment burden on participating schools. To determine the effect of the program, any additional assessments would have to be widely administered to both participating and non-participating students.

Data quality has improved, but still limits evaluation

In previous COVID ILSP evaluation phases, poor data quality from inconsistent practices or unfit-for-purpose data collection platforms meant that we could not draw conclusions about the program's impact on academic outcomes. In particular, the use of the SPaRO reporting system to attempt to capture student-level data was identified as a cause of poor data quality and missing student data in Phase 2, in 2021.

In Phase 3, PLAN2 was the only platform used to record student participation and tuition characteristics. Additionally, in Phase 3 the outcome evaluation was restricted to a sample of schools that we had contacted to explicitly resolve data quality issues. Unfortunately, despite these steps, some data quality issues remain, which we describe in further detail below.

Contacting schools to improve data quality had limited success

We conducted the outcome evaluation on a sample of schools instead of the whole population, as it was deemed impossible to correct data anomalies for all 2,186 participating schools. A representative, random sample of 282 schools was selected to be the sample on which we evaluated the program's academic and engagement effects. These schools were contacted by the COVID ILSP team, and any data anomalies were discussed with them for clarification or correction. This process continued over the 10 weeks of Term 4 2022.

Data quality improved by the end of the process, but around a quarter of tuition groups still had some anomalous data at the time of analysis (Table 9).

Table 9

Impact of 'data cleaning' calls to schools on data quality

Data anomalies	Original state (Term 4, Week 1)	Final state (Term 4, Week 10)
Group size abnormally large (9 or more students)	7.9% of all groups	5.1% of all groups
Cycle lengths abnormally short (less than 5 weeks)	9.5%	8.0%
Cycle lengths abnormally long (more than 25 weeks)	7.9%	7.3%
Group created with no tuition information (area of focus and implementation details missing)	22.4%	10.8%
Total tuition groups with data quality issues	40.0%	27.3%

Partial reporting is easy in PLAN2, but complete reporting is more difficult

The program required schools to report their students and tuition group characteristics with the PLAN2 reporting platform. Data entry was a 2-step process where schools first listed the students in a group, and then separately recorded the group's tuition properties, such as area of tuition focus, cycle length, frequency of tuition, and mode of delivery. It was possible for a school to complete the first step without the second. There was no prompt for school staff to continue with the second step of entering tuition data for groups, and no method within PLAN2 to enforce entry. To be aware of the second step, school staff needed to have completed training on the program's data entry requirements.

This meant some schools believed they had fulfilled their reporting requirements when they had actually only started the process. In the sample of 282 schools, 26 schools (with 22% of groups) had recorded student participation with no group properties. After the data cleaning process, 11% of tuition groups were still missing this information, reducing the usefulness of their data.

Flexible program delivery hampered accurate reporting

Schools were given maximum flexibility to assign students to different types of groups with different properties. A single student can experience tuition in numerous settings and contexts. This leads to problems when evaluating what worked and did not work in the program, because it is no longer clear which element of tuition delivery caused the observed results, even within a single student.

With maximum implementation flexibility given to schools, it is burdensome for school staff to capture accurate data for either implementation or evaluation purposes. Recording a list of participating students is straightforward, but arranging student data into coherent tuition groups, with consistent tuition properties, is difficult. Careful review and correction of the data by trained and experienced school staff could potentially overcome this problem, but would take more time and effort. More frequent or automated feedback on data quality may be required to help schools correct issues closer to the time of data entry.

The effects of key implementation choices could not be analysed

The causal impact of variations in tuition duration, intensity or mode of delivery could not be determined for 2 reasons:

- Schools adapted the number, intensity and length of tuition cycles in response to how well individual students performed.
- For differences in modes of delivery, there was either too little variation or inconsistent definitions of the differing types of delivery.

Schools adapted the number and length of tuition cycles by student need, preventing analysis of the effect of tuition duration or intensity

During the data cleaning process, we contacted schools to confirm unusually long tuition cycles, among other anomalies in their data. Schools reported that students who responded well to small group tuition were removed from the program early, while those who did not improve were kept in the program, often for more than one cycle of tuition. Some schools confirmed tuition cycles ran for the entire 2022 school year, and reported that students who did not seem to improve were tutored for the entire year.

Schools' flexibility in program implementation supports student-centred practice. However, because schools often adapted the amount of tuition delivered to each student depending on how well that student responded to tuition, we could not evaluate the effect of the amount of tuition on their outcomes.

Some delivery modes are too infrequently used or too flexibly defined for analysis

Of the tuition groups that recorded complete implementation data, 81% were delivered by withdrawing students from the classroom and 16% through in-class tuition (Table 5, [page 28](#)). So few groups were delivered before or after school (less than 1%) or online (1%) that we could not estimate the comparative efficacy of these modes of delivery.

The term 'in-class tuition' was sometimes used interchangeably with 'withdrawal' by schools, especially when students were withdrawn from regular teaching but remained in the same room as other students (refer to [page 32](#)). Given the lack of strict definitions for data entry in PLAN2, we could not make a clear distinction between the 2 tuition modes on the scale required to draw conclusions about their effectiveness.

Unobserved confounding variables may influence findings

We attempted to statistically control for as many plausible confounding variables as possible. However, it is never entirely possible to rule out unobserved but confounded variables.

One unmeasured variable that might have confounded the evaluation's results was student-level disability status as captured by the Nationally Consistent Collection of Data on School Students with Disability (NCCD). Aggregate NCCD data indicated that COVID ILSP students were more likely to need adjustment for disability than the general school population (Table 8, [page 35](#)). NCCD student-level information is based on imputed disability and teacher judgment and, as per the Access Policy, is considered sensitive data. We were therefore not able to use student-level NCCD information about disability, including to control for NCCD status in our analyses, or to match participants to similar non-participants.

We were able to use student-level disability information recorded in the department's Integration Funding Support (IFS) dataset. This dataset includes students with moderate to high support needs and have a confirmed disability. Schools received targeted funding for students in this dataset to implement adjustments for individual students. Because of its stricter inclusion criteria compared to NCCD, it contains fewer students. Approximately 2.3% of COVID ILSP participants in 2022 had received an IFS allocation, compared to 1.8% of students in the general school population. We used this information in the matching and modelling process.

A student's prior participation in the 2021 COVID ILSP was not considered during matching or modelling. Due to the incomplete reporting of participating students in 2021, it is almost certain there are students who had participated in 2021 who are incorrectly labelled as not having previously participated. In 2021, a third of schools did not report usable student-level participation information. We considered it better not to use this variable in the matching process than to include it and introduce an unmeasurable bias.

Evaluation question 6: What was the impact of the program on student engagement?

We used student attendance as a proxy for student engagement. Participating in the program had no measurable effect on the number of absences from school compared to non-participating students.

Number of absences from school

Attendance is a common proxy for student engagement, with more engaged students having fewer absences. We examined the effect of the program on attendance by comparing participating students with similar non-participating students on their number of absences in Term 1 2022 (before participation) to Term 4 (after participation). The results are interpreted in terms of the percentage difference in absences between participating and similar non-participating students. If the program had a beneficial effect on attendance, we would expect to see a change over time towards fewer absences in participating students.

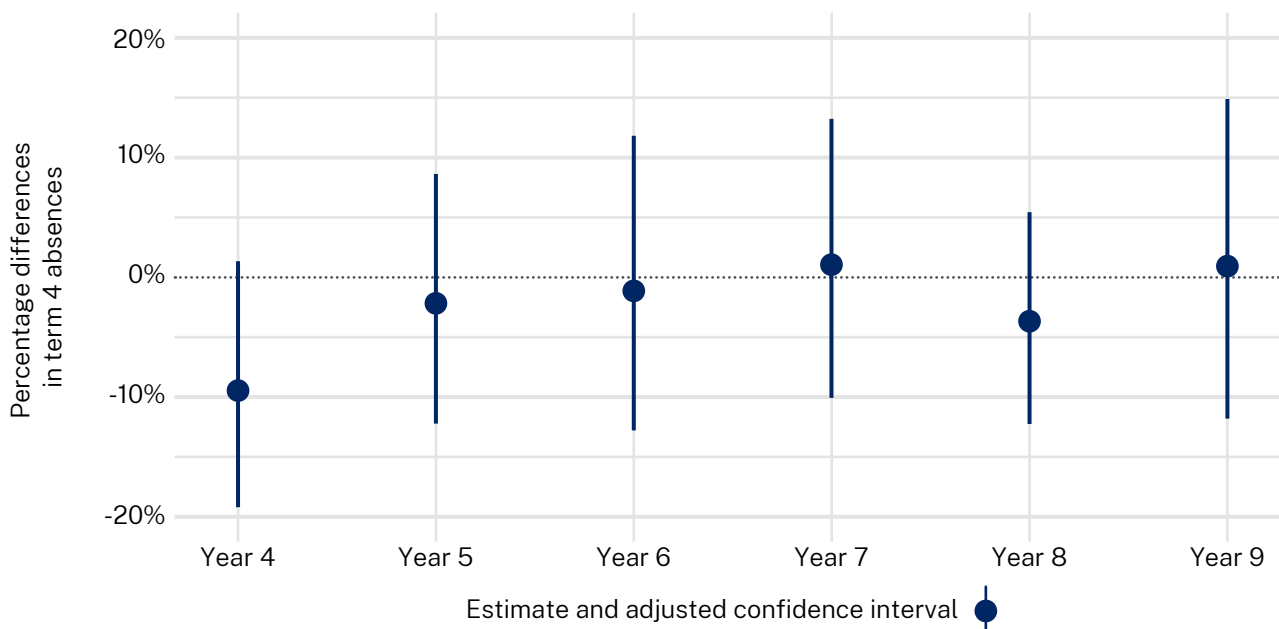
We matched participating students to similar non-participating students within the same sample of 282 schools as used for the academic outcome analysis. Students were matched on their demographic, academic, historical attendance and school-level characteristics. When we matched students on academic characteristics, we used 2021 Check-in assessment results. For this reason, the analysis of attendance is limited to year levels 4 to 9.

The program had no measurable impact on number of absences

For the 6 analysed year levels, the estimated differences in absences between participating and non-participating students could not be statistically distinguished from zero. The program may have had the most beneficial effects on engagement for Year 4 students, with participating students estimated to have 10% fewer absences than their matched non-participating peers, but these results were not statistically significant after correction for multiple comparisons. For other year levels, the results were less than 5% different in either direction, and were also not statistically significant.

Figure 27**Program effect on absences, by year level**

(n=17,508 students; 8,754 participants and 8,754 non-participants)



Source: Difference-in-difference analysis of Term 1 and Term 4 2022 absence rates for 8,754 participants and 8,754 matched non-participants. Lower values indicate fewer absences of participating students compared to non-participants; higher values indicate more absences. The 95% confidence intervals were adjusted for multiple comparisons. All confidence intervals (the vertical lines) cross the horizontal line of 0, indicating no statistically significant differences between participants and non-participants.

Limitations in estimating program effect on engagement

Other timepoints and measures could be used to measure changes in engagement

We used Term 4 2022 as the outcome timepoint for this analysis because by this point most students had completed their participation and any program effect could then be observed. Students had to have received at least some small group tuition before the start of Term 4 to be included. Students who only received tuition after the start of Term 4 were excluded.

Using Term 4 absences as the outcome measure limits the sensitivity of the analysis because only 5 weeks of attendance are recorded and validated for Term 4, unlike in other terms where 10 weeks of validated attendance data are available. An alternative would be to compare students on their attendance in Term 1 2022 versus their attendance in Term 1 2023. However, 2023 attendance data was not available in the timeframe required for this report.

Attendance is only one of many possible proxies for student engagement. Engagement is a multifaceted concept with many elements, some of which may not be measured well by attendance. Results from the yearly Tell Them From Me student survey could complement the analysis of attendance. However, the Tell Them From Me results for 2022/23 were not available in the timeframe required for this report.

Using Term 1 2022 as the baseline may have diluted the estimated effects of the program on attendance

We did not have an unbiased starting point to measure attendance. To ensure valid comparisons, participants and non-participants were matched on their similarity on attendance at baseline, before participation in the program. Term 4 2021 would have been the ideal baseline timepoint, as it occurred right before the start of the 2022 program and would be directly comparable with Term 4 2022. However, COVID-19 lockdowns and learning-from-home orders in the second half of 2021 meant that the department did not universally collect or validate attendance records. This meant that we had to use Term 1 2022 as the starting timepoint to measure baseline attendance and to match participating students with their similar non-participating peers.

If a student participated in the program in Term 1 2022 and attended school more regularly as a result, their baseline would already have been affected by their participation. This biases estimation of the program impact towards no effect. If large differences between the participating and non-participating groups had been apparent, this could still be attributed to the program. However, as no significant differences were observed, it is possible that some improvements in attendance happened during the baseline measurement period and so could not be estimated by this analysis.

Evaluation question 7: What are the economic costs and benefits of the change in students' academic outcomes attributable to the program?

As we could not attribute changes to participants' academic growth to their participation in the program, we have not proceeded with a cost-benefit analysis. The program may have unmonetisable benefits and wider economic stimulus effects that are not included in this cost-benefit analysis.

Cost-benefit analysis framework

We intended to monetise the economic benefits to participating students by estimating increased lifetime earnings for those students proportional to their improvement in standardised test scores (French et al. 2014, Hanushek and Woessmann 2012, Rose 2006). To isolate the effect of a program on test scores, these improvements must be measured in relation to a comparison group, as most students experience academic growth over time, regardless of whether they participate in specific programs.

The estimated monetary benefit can be compared to the known cost of delivering the program at schools to estimate the program's overall cost-benefit outcome.

Cost-benefit outcome

The 2022 program may not recover its costs through students' improved lifetime earnings

In most cases, students who participated in the program experienced the same improvement in their test scores as similar students who did not participate. We could not attribute participants' academic growth to the effect of the program. Given that we could not attribute participants' academic growth to their participation in the program, we cannot attribute monetary benefits to that growth. As such, we did not proceed to a formal analysis of the economic costs and benefits of the changes to students' academic outcomes.

However, the cost of delivering the program is known: schools spent \$250 million on program implementation in 2022. The \$250 million spent by schools in 2022 may not be realised as long-term improved lifetime earnings for participating students.

The program likely had unmonetisable benefits

A large majority of program educators and classroom teachers said the program improved student confidence, motivation and attitude towards school (Figure 10, [page 51](#)). Most staff also reported improvements in their own capabilities, collaboration and leadership skills as a result of their involvement in delivering the program (Figure 20, [page 72](#)).

These benefits are difficult to monetise, but may be long-term economic benefits for both students and staff.

The economic stimulus effects of the program have not been analysed

Our intended analysis focused on monetary benefits from increased academic performance of students. Other than delivery of tuition, one of the program's original goals was to provide economic stimulus in response to the challenges NSW faced during and after the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020 and 2021 (NSW Treasury 2020). This stimulus was primarily expected to be realised through employing additional educators for the program. The program employed at least 6,884 individuals in 2022 (Figure 1, [page 25](#)). We did not examine the effects of this stimulus as a benefit of the program.

References

- French MT, Homer JF, Popovici I and Robins PK (2014) 'What you do in high school matters: high school GPA, educational attainment, and labor market earnings as a young adult', *Eastern Economic Journal*, 41(3):370–386, doi:10.1057/ej.2014.22.
- Hanushek EA and Woessmann L (2012) 'Do better schools lead to more growth? Cognitive skills, economic outcomes, and causation', *Journal of Economic Growth*, 17(4):267–321, doi:10.1007/s10887-012-9081-x.
- Hattie J (2015) 'The applicability of Visible Learning to higher education', *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning in Psychology*, 1(1):79–91, doi:10.1037/stl0000021.
- MultiLit (n.d.) *MiniLit: meeting initial needs in literacy*, MultiLit website, accessed 15 February 2023a.
- (n.d.) *MacqLit Program: the Macquarie Literacy Program for small group instruction*, MacqLit website, accessed 15 February 2023b.
- NSW Department of Education (2022) *COVID Intensive Learning Support Program: What contributes to a successful program?*, accessed 15 February 2022.
- NSW Treasury (2020) *The NSW Budget 2020-21: Overview*, NSW Treasury, Sydney NSW, accessed 27 July 2023.
- Rose H (2006) 'Do gains in test scores explain labor market outcomes?', *Economics of Education Review*, 25(4):430–446, doi:10.1016/j.econedurev.2005.07.005.
- Sonnemann J and Goss P (2020) *COVID catch-up: helping disadvantaged students close the equity gap*, Grattan Institute, accessed 15 February 2022.

Authors: Cecile Casanova, Huy Pham, Sam Gardiner and Amy Robson

Centre for Education Statistics and Evaluation

GPO Box 33, Sydney NSW 2001, Australia

✉ info@cese.nsw.gov.au

🌐 education.nsw.gov.au/cese

🗨️ yammer.com/det.nsw.edu.au

Licensed under the [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)

357_181223_GSj_v5_AA1GS

